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Guitarist

Issue 507

FEBRUARY 2024

"I swing my arm 15 times, I have an adrenaline rush and I just let my fingers fly..."

GRETA VAN FLEET
Featuring
JAKE KISZKA ON THE NEW ALBUM, STUDIO SOUNDS, VINTAGE GUITARS AND MORE!

TOWNSHEND

EXCLUSIVE!

THE WHO LEGEND OPENS UP ABOUT MAKING THEIR MASTERPIECE 'WHO'S NEXT'

50TH ANNIVERSARY

PLUS
STERLING BY MUSIC MAN
INSIDE MULE RESOPHONIC GUITARS
JOE PASS & HENDRIX

FUTURE

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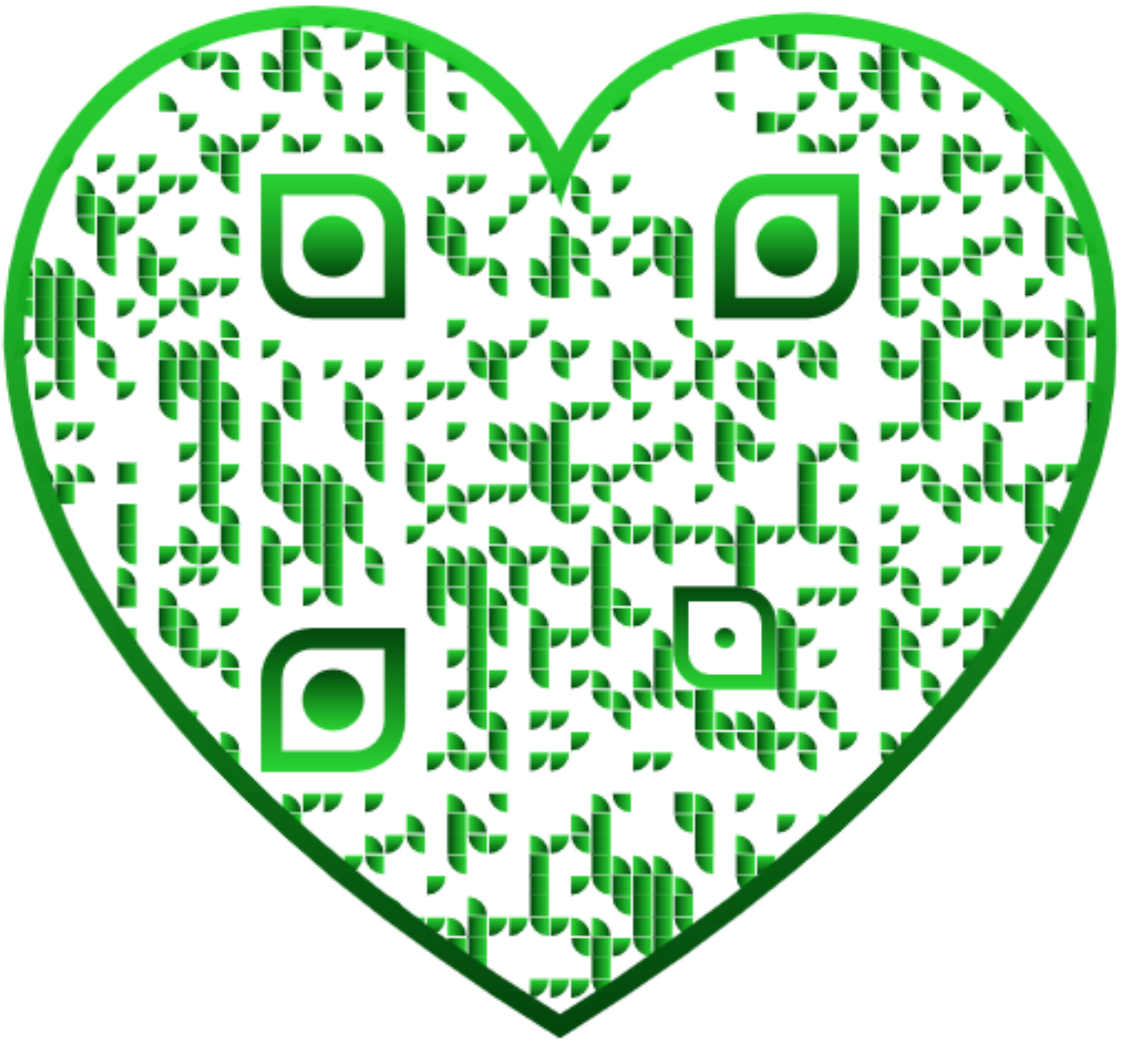

TRIPTYCH

THE POWER OF THREE

Pushing the boundaries of vintage Strat tones into uncharted territories of super heavy fuzz-drenched riffing

"For me, the perfect Strat tone has been an ongoing journey for the last few years, and I'm happy to say that the journey has ended with the Triptych single coils"

RABEA MASSAAD

BEA

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My Generation

I think my first introduction to The Who was way back in 1970 when a school friend played me the *Live At Leeds* album. I was aware of them beforehand, but the album's explosive content put the band – and Pete Townshend's guitar playing – firmly on my musical map. I soon bought my own copy and revelled not only in repeated doses of tracks like *Substitute*, *Magic Bus* and the 14-minute-long version of *My Generation*, but also the paperwork that accompanied the album. These were the days of vinyl, of course, and in those days *Live At Leeds* came in a manila folder, as opposed to the more usual sleeve. The record itself had a mocked-up handwritten label to look like a test pressing – including the advice, "Crackling noises ok, do not correct" – and was accompanied by a sheaf of paperwork that recreated letters, the typed out lyrics to *My Generation*, a County Court Notice for the non-return of some Vox instruments, and the contract for The Who's iconic appearance at Woodstock Festival in 1969, which showed that they were to be paid $12,500 for their performance.

A little later on I skipped a few lessons at school to go and watch the *Woodstock* movie, having convinced the cinema staff I was old enough to see an 18 Certificate showing, and was totally overwhelmed by the power and energy of The Who's appearance. So, when we had the opportunity to chat with Pete and talk about the seminal *Who's Next*, as well as his long-standing *Lifehouse* project, we threw down the welcome mat.

Elsewhere in this month's magazine, we talk to Greta Van Fleet's Jake Kiszka about his band's meteoric rise to stadium-shaking stardom. They have been compared to Led Zeppelin many times in the past – in fact, Robert Plant is on record as saying "There's this band from Detroit called Greta Van Fleet: they *are* 'Led Zeppelin I'..." – but Jake is adamant that the band's latest album steps out from Zep's shadows.

In sadder news, as we were preparing to go to press with this issue we heard about the untimely passing of Moody Blues and Wings guitarist Denny Laine. Watch out for a tribute in these pages next month.

David Mead **Deputy Editor**

Editor's Highlights

Blues Dues
Epiphone's latest collaboration with Joe Bonamassa is another stunner with the tones and playability to match **p18**

Elite Jazzer
Joe Pass was an amazing performer and soloist whose albums are masterclasses in the fine art of playing jazz guitar **p76**

Under The Hammer
Mark Knopfler becomes the latest guitar superstar to send some of his precious instruments off to Christie's auction room **p70**

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ABOVE: JOE PASS PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES MARK KNOPFLER PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

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PLAY IN FULL BLOOM

MARK LETTIERI SIGNATURE MODEL

"All guitarists have a sound in their head – a sound that evolves and grows as they progress, discovering all of the beautiful idiosyncrasies that define their individual voice. To facilitate this process, players need a vibrant, dynamic guitar that becomes a free space in which their personality can unfold. PRS and I designed Fiore to be this guitar."

- Mark Lettieri

PRS PAUL REED SMITH GUITARS

© 2021 PRS Guitars | Photo by Hunter Selman

Contents

ISSUE 507 FEBRUARY 2024

COVER FEATURE

PHOTO BY ROB MONK/CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE

INTERVIEW

PHOTO BY ERIKA GOLDRING/GETTY IMAGES

REVIEW

REGULARS

032 Gas Supply
034 Fretbuzz
036 New Music
038 Tones Behind The Tracks
042 Opinion
048 Substitute
050 Feedback
106 Subscribe
114 Bought & Sold
116 The Mod Squad
120 Nitty Gritty
124 Talking Loud
130 Next Month

FEATURES

052 Obituary: Kevin 'Geordie' Walker
054 Greta Van Fleet
060 Pete Townshend
070 The Mark Knopfler Collection Auction
076 Pioneers: Joe Pass
108 Blueprint: Mule Resophonic Guitars

NEW GEAR

008 **Sterling By Music Man** Valentine Chambered Bigsby
014 **Blackstar** HT Club 40 Mk III
018 **Epiphone** Joe Bonamassa 1963 SG Custom
024 **Two Notes** Captor X SE
026 **MXR** M309 Joshua Ambient Echo
028 **Beetronics** Nectar Tone Sweetener
030 **Vintage** V52 ProShop Unique Black Icon with Bigsby
082 **Cream T** Polaris Custom
092 **Gibson** Les Paul Modern Figured & Modern Lite
102 **Universal Audio** Heavenly Plate Reverb, Evermore Studio Reverb, Orion Tape Echo & 1176 Studio Compressor

TECHNIQUES

126 Blues Headlines with Richard Barrett

VIDEO & AUDIO

To enjoy all of the video and audio content in this issue, type the following link into your browser and follow the instructions in the post entitled 'Guitarist video and audio': **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

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STERLING BY MUSIC MAN JV60CB VALENTINE CHAMBERED BIGSBY
£1,149

WHAT IS IT? New and affordable take on James Valentine's signature, this time with a chambered ash body and Bigsby

Latest Flame

This new model in the James Valentine line-up seduces us with its chambered ash body, cool Bigsby vibrato and a range of inspiring tones

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Phil Barker

We loved the all-American version of the Maroon 5 guitarist's signature model on first meeting it back in 2016. The more affordable Indonesian-built Sterling By Music Man JV60 followed two years later and was pretty much a Southeast Asian take on that guitar but with a tweak or two here and there. Then for 2023 we heard about Sterling's brand-new Chambered models – with and without Bigsby – and it's the former version we finally got our hands on.

That original Music Man Valentine featured a solid ash, double-cutaway body with roasted maple, 648mm (25.5-inch) scale neck with a 305mm (12-inch) radius fingerboard and slim 42mm (1.65-inch) wide nut. Also included were the company's 'modern classic' hardtail bridge, plus push-push pots for both volume and tone: one for overall boost and the other a coil-split for the neck humbucker. Nestled by the bridge sat a humbucking-sized single coil, its polepieces running diagonally across the chrome cover.

The basic bones of that instrument remained on the subsequent Sterling By Music Man JV60 version, although it lost the neck pickup's coil-split and received

Bigsby
LICENSED

1. The Valentine's neck humbucker offers incredible clarity and string-to-string separation. Note, too, the easy-access truss rod adjustment nut, which can be operated with the use of a small screwdriver

a different bridge. While the later JV60C and our review model, the JV60CB, follow the Sterling's basic template, this one's chambered white ash body, tune-o-matic bridge and Bigsby B50 vibrato tailpiece make it the slightly leftfield and perhaps most interesting alternative.

Design traits this model shares with other Music Man family guitars include four-over-two locking tuners, a five-bolt neck plate with dressed-back heel, easy body-end truss rod adjustment, and matt-finished neck (although not hand-rubbed wax and oil as is present on USA-made equivalents). Like other active models,

2. This particular model (and the non-Bigsby version) features a chambered white ash body that seems to lend even more openness and clarity to the Valentine's already classy tones

With both pickups on, the mix of humbucker and single-coil tones conjures up a bright Rickenbacker-style chime

a quick-release battery compartment is discreetly located on the guitar's rear.

With knurled chrome master volume and tone knobs, a three-way lever switch, black pickguard, and an f-hole tidily cut from the ash front (the back is separately glued on), it's a functional but great-looking guitar. The see-through gloss Butterscotch finish visually complements the dark roasted maple neck and has been superbly applied. In fact, we can't fault the Indonesian factory's attention to detail in any respect.

Feel & Sounds

Great-feeling necks have always been a Music Man byword, and here the JV60CB's maintains the trend. Although its slender nut may not appeal to all players, Eddie Van Halen was a fan, so you know it's not the big inhibitor to technique that some maintain. The chunky C-profile neck is a comfy palmful, and while the Valentine's 22 frets are quite narrow, they're tall enough that string bends and vibrato never feel compromised. Also, the body's twin cutaways and dressed-away heel mean that top-end forays are not an issue, and the guitar's thinline-semi

3

construction makes it a tad less weighty than the fully solid model.

A Bigsby vibrato means divebombs are off the agenda, but a gentle wobble of the arm will add a pleasant shimmer to chords or, as David Gilmour likes to do, provide extra expression to finger vibrato at the top of string bends. So there's much to commend the Valentine as a player's guitar, even though some may mourn the absence of a Strat-style forearm contour and belly cut.

As usual, a 20-watt Laney Lionheart combo is our beast of burden when it comes to demoing our guitar's range of sounds, and our first impression is that it's a bright-toned instrument. Beginning on the neck humbucker, single notes leap out with a clarity you'd more readily associate with a Strat, while chords resonate with remarkable separation. Switch over to the bridge single coil and things become bright and spanky but with no hint of screech or harshness. Actually, it's a sound that puts us in mind of George Harrison's Telecaster in The Beatles' *Octopus's Garden*.

With both pickups on, the mix of humbucker and single-coil tones conjures up the kind of bright chime you might expect from a Rickenbacker; it would certainly sound great in Jam or Who numbers. However you reference it, rhythm parts, clean riffs or jangly solos are all well served here. Pile on some amp or pedal drive and the guitar retains all of its musicality. In fact, in our experience brighter pickups often win out here, since they manage to retain their clean dynamics and expressiveness, whereas overly fat and powerful ones can turn dull and flabby.

Clean or dirty, pushing in the volume knob to engage the Valentine's active boost makes everything sound altogether bigger and creamier. It's just the right level of kick for solos and is an excellent addition. It's worth mentioning the master tone control, too. It's extremely powerful, lending an almost baritone voice to clean low notes, while Clapton's 'woman' tone (on either pickup, gain piled on and tone right off) is definitely more *contralto* than *soprano*.

3. Many of those in the know reckon that a Bigsby on a semi-solid thinline creates the perfect combination for a strong, chiming tone. Of course, it also lends pleasant wobbles to chords and single notes

4. The Valentine's controls are simple and intuitive, with basic master volume and tone pots plus a three-way lever switch. The ace in the pack is the volume's push-push knob, which kicks in 12dB of boost

4

Music Man's classic five-bolt neck with swept-back heel is also a feature here, as is the quick-release battery compartment for the active circuitry

STERLING BY MUSIC MAN JV60CB VALENTINE CHAMBERED BIGSBY

PRICE: £1,149 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Double-cutaway, semi-hollow thinline electric
BODY: Semi-hollow ash
NECK: Roasted maple with body end truss rod adjustment and 5-screw bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm (1.65")
FINGERBOARD: Glued-on roasted maple, with 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, narrow tall
HARDWARE Licensed Bigsby B50 vibrato tailpiece, tune-o-matic-style bridge, rear-locking enclosed tuners – chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 50mm
ELECTRICS: Sterling by Music Man neck humbucker and humbucking-size bridge single coil, 3-way lever pickup selector, single volume (with 12dB push-push boost) and master tone control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.24/7.15
OPTIONS: N/A
RANGE OPTIONS: Sterling By Music Man JV60 solidbody with hardtail costs £879; JV60C chambered body with hardtail is £1,079
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Gloss Butterscotch only (as reviewed)

Strings And Things
01903 942600
www.sterlingbymusicman.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Individual looks, great fit and finish, fine playability, and an inspiring range of sounds; great active boost switch; the Bigsby adds extra coolness!

CONS Some may find the nut width slightly narrow, and others might feel that forearm and belly contouring would have been welcome

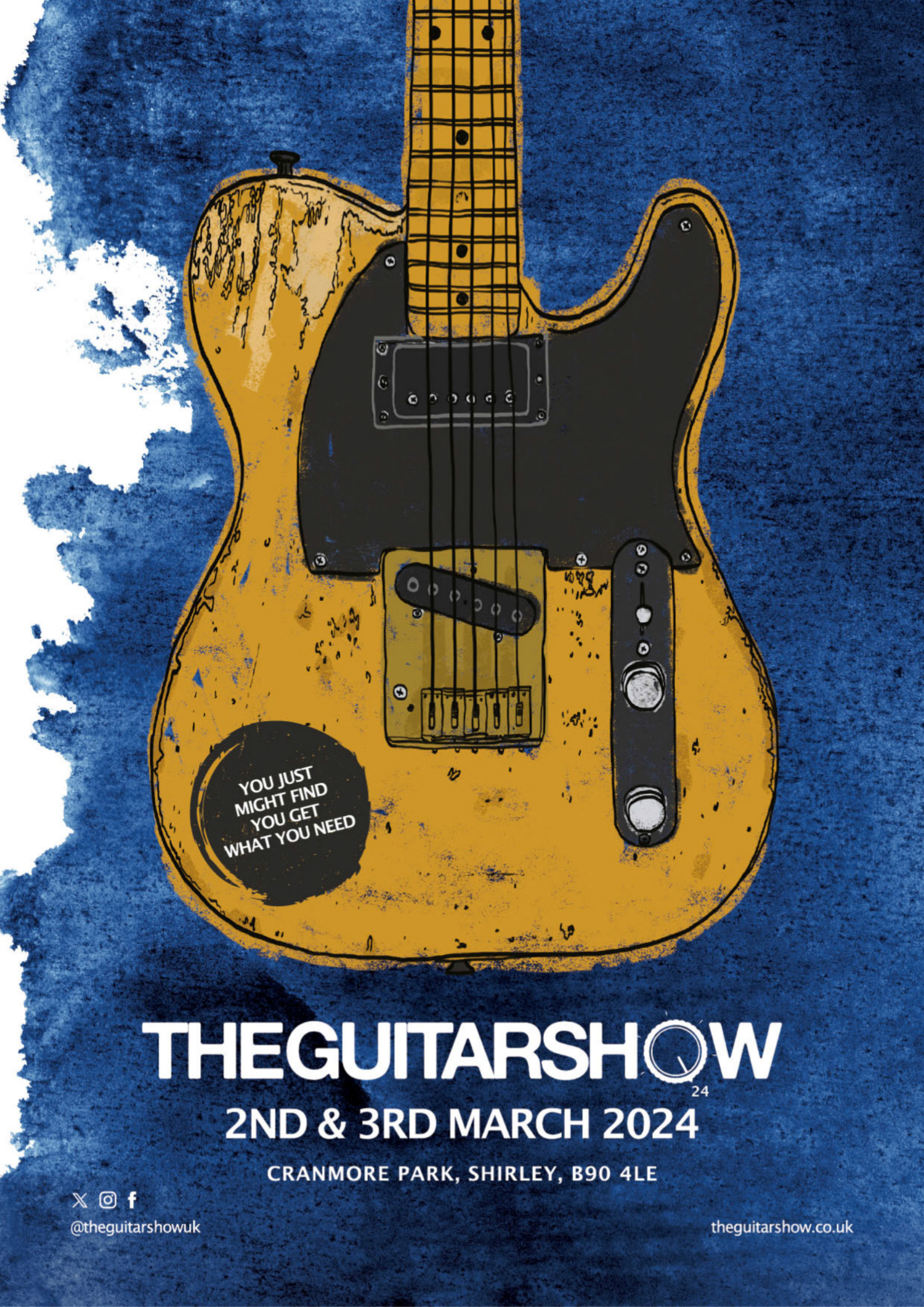
Verdict

When confronting the 'diet' version of a guitar that one has enjoyed in full-fat form, we often meet it with a degree of trepidation. What corners have been cut? Will the pickups sound rubbish? Will it play like a dog? Will the fit and finish disappoint? Well, when it comes to Sterling By Music Man's latest twist on its excellent US-made predecessor, none of the above applies. From the moment we pulled it from its sturdy black gigbag it looked, felt and sounded like a proper grown-up, professional musical instrument. In fact, looking it over, plugging in and playing it, its country of origin and price point were the furthest things from our thoughts.

Clean or dirty, pushing in the volume knob to engage the active boost makes everything sound bigger and creamier

This is no mere cheap version of what's gone before. Clearly with huge help from Ernie Ball Music Man in the States and, of course, James Valentine's own musical input, Sterling has devised a guitar that stands entirely on its own merits. While we also like the Indonesian-made JV60 and JV60C, the pairing of this instrument's semi-solid construction *and* Bigsby seems to elevate it to another level.

What hasn't changed is a great-feeling neck and a stunning set of tones that would make one of these a welcome addition to anyone's guitar rack. It's an admirable piece of work, and at under half the price of the American Valentine model, it's a complete no-brainer.



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BLACKSTAR HT CLUB 40 MK III
£899

WHAT IS IT? Smallest combo in the new Mk III HT Venue range, which adds new features and improvements to the popular core valve-amp series

One More Time...

Blackstar's third iteration of the HT Venue range features updated styling and powerful modern features, such CabRig speaker emulation and a brand-new digital reverb

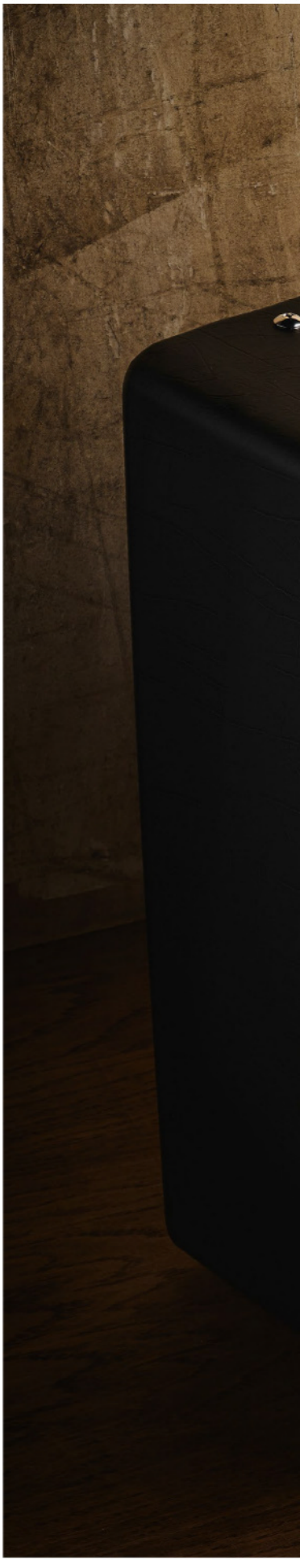
Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

Introduced back in 2010 at that year's winter NAMM Show, Blackstar's HT Venue series of mid-priced combos and heads quickly established the company as the go-to brand for working players at all levels. Seven years later in 2017, we were among the first to glimpse the updated HT Venue Mk II. And today, almost another seven years on again, we're looking at the upgrade to the upgrade, in the shape of the new HT Venue Mk III. Has Blackstar's unceasing R&D program produced another winner? Let's take a look at possibly the most popular combo in the range, the 1x12 Club 40.

Like its predecessors, the new Mk III Club 40 is a good-looking amp, with pleasing proportions enhanced by Blackstar's elegant revised styling. A smart new metal badge sits atop a black and silver sparkle grille cloth, which conceals a single 12-inch Celestion Seventy 80 loudspeaker. Inside the chassis, most of the electronics sit on one large high-quality printed circuit board, with the familiar clean layout and minimal wiring we've come to expect on Blackstar products.

The Club 40 is a footswitchable two-channel design with a choice of two very different voices on both channels. The straightforward controls will be familiar to Blackstar users and newbies alike: the Clean channel has knobs for Volume, Treble and Bass, with a Voice select switch that toggles between American and British influences; while the Overdrive channel offers Gain, Volume, Bass, Middle, Treble and Blackstar's patented ISF (Infinite Shape Feature), which progressively changes the tone network from British to American configuration, adding great tonal flexibility. Another toggle switch changes the Overdrive channel between classic and modern voices.

As with the Clean channel, many circuit changes take place when these toggle switches are flipped, including EQ, gain, output stage negative feedback and speaker damping. Towards the far right of the front panel, there's a Master Volume and Reverb Level knob, together with another small toggle switch that drops the Club 40's output down to around four watts for home practice and recording.



Blackstar
HT CLUB 40 MK III
INPUT
CLEAN
VOLUME
BASS
REVERB
OVERDRIVE
GAIN
OD EQUALISATION
MIDDLE
TREBLE
MASTER POWER
STANDBY POWER
ON
CHANNEL
VOICE

1. The all-new Mk III HT Venue amps have a brand-new badge that underlines the classy styling, as well as hinting at the significant design upgrades inside the chassis

2. Big news for the Mk III amps is the addition of CabRig, Blackstar's in-house dynamic microphone, speaker cabinet and room simulation, which sidesteps the latency and phase issues often experienced with multiple IRs

3. A two-button footswitch comes supplied as standard, or you can upgrade to the optional five-button FS-14, which accesses all the channels and voices as well as reverb and a boost. You can use both footswitches together for even more flexibility

4. Sitting on the front panel next to the master volume, this useful Power toggle switch drops the Club 40's output down to a home-friendly four watts. You can also use the rear-panel headphones/CabRig outputs for silent practice and recording as they stay active in standby mode

One of the most important additions to the new Mk III amps is the addition of CabRig, Blackstar's own dynamic microphone, cabinet and environment simulation, accessed via USB using the Architect desktop app. On the rear panel, there's a mono XLR and stereo headphones/line out for feeding the CabRig signal into a console, while the USB socket allows four-channel recording direct to your DAW, as well as loading up to three onboard CabRig presets.

Other rear-panel features include a series effects loop with Level control, a choice of Dark or Light voices for the HT's digital reverb, and a pair of jack sockets for the supplied two-way unit and/or the optional FS-14 five-button controller, which access all channels and voices, together with a global boost option. There's even a Kensington lock slot, making this combo ideal for semi-permanent backline installations in places such as rehearsal studios, schools and churches. Together with the new tweaked cosmetics, the HT Venue Mk III version of the Club 40 looks slick and ready to rock, with all the features you'd expect on a modern valve amp.

Feel & Sounds

We checked out the Club 40 with our regular Strat and Les Paul guitars, using a small pedalboard and a PC connection to check out the CabRig sounds. The Clean channel's two voices will be familiar to most ears, with a tight bass, slightly scooped midrange and sweet treble in the USA setting compared with a warmer and more dynamic British tone that chimes at medium level settings and can be pushed hard into a mild overdrive if needed.

Likewise, the Overdrive channel swaps between a classic 'hot-rod' overdrive with medium speaker damping and a looser, more aggressive modern voice that benefits from a powerful pre-gain mid boost. This sounds great with single coils – but it's magical with a good PAF-style humbucker. The EQs operate smoothly and using the overdrive channel's ISF, dialling in any guitar for USA or UK tones (and any point in between), is an intuitive operation that takes just a few seconds.

The CabRig outputs lift the new Mk III into a different league, with the ability to send mono or stereo feeds to a console with the speaker switched on or off, making the Club 40 ideal for quiet stages

The Reverb Voice switch offers a choice of bright, slightly crashy vintage plate reverb or a warmer more 'boutique' room model. Both reverbs are very high quality and easily replace outboards or plug-ins

in venues like theatres or churches. CabRig settings are accessed using the Club 40's rear-panel USB socket and Blackstar's Architect desktop app, which lets you edit, store and load virtual microphones, cabinets and environments, as well as edit the Club 40's digital reverb to taste. As you might expect, the software is easy to use with clean no-frills rendering, while the simulations are eerily authentic, with no latency or phase issues.

When you want to rock, though, there's plenty of level from the Celestion Seventy 80 loudspeaker, which is one of our favourite combo drivers, enhanced with a smooth bass response from the slightly oversized cabinet.

Verdict

While valve technology remains frozen in time, digital advances continue to affect every area of music making. And there's been a definite trend in the last couple of years toward integrating both approaches, with studio-quality digital reverbs increasingly replacing the venerable spring tank, and integrated digital cabinet simulations like CabRig with outputs for live and studio use.

The CabRig outputs lift the Club 40 into a different league, making it ideal for quiet stages

It's hard to level criticism when every aspect of the Mk III has been evaluated and polished by Blackstar's R&D team. The only thing that some players may find difficulty with is the Club 40's size and weight: as 1x12 40-watters go, it's on the heavy side. There are no smaller alternatives in the new range as yet, although, of course, if you need compact and portable, Blackstar already has several tempting options to look at.

Aimed at serious amateurs and working pro players, Blackstar's new improved HT Venue Mk III range continues to provide all you could want from a modern guitar amplifier, with affordable pricing that stands up well compared to the competition. If you want to combine authentic valve tone with digital pizazz, it's a great choice.

BLACKSTAR HT CLUB 40 MK III 1X12 COMBO

PRICE: £899
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Valve/solid-state preamp, valve power amp
VALVES: 2x 12AX7 preamp, 2x EL34 power amp (can be rebiased for 6L6)
OUTPUT: 40W RMS, switchable to 4W
DIMENSIONS: 588 (w) x 260 (d) x 480mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 24/53
CABINET: Plywood
LOUDSPEAKER: 1x 12" Celestion Seventy 80
CHANNELS: 2, both with dual-voice switching
CONTROLS: Clean channel volume, bass, treble, voice select. Overdrive channel gain, voice select, volume, bass, middle, treble, ISF (Infinite Shape Feature), reverb level, hi/low power switch, master volume. CabRig sim select, loop level, reverb dark/light switches (on rear panel)
FOOTSWITCH: 2-button footswitch (supplied) toggles channels and voice type
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Digital reverb, CabRig speaker-emulated DI/headphones out, series effects loop, USB recording and connection to Blackstar's Architect app
OPTIONS: 5-button FS-14 footswitch sells for £95; allows selection of all channels and voices, plus a boost on all channels and reverb on/off
RANGE OPTIONS: Mk III HT Venue range also includes: Stage 60 1x12 combo (£999), Stage 60 2x12 combo (£1,490), Club 50H head (£899) and Stage 100H head (£999). Matching 1x12, 2x12 and 4x12 cabs cost £269, £379 and £569 respectively

Blackstar Amplification Ltd
01604 817817
www.blackstaramps.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Subtle visual tweaks give a serious professional vibe; onboard CabRig speaker emulation; excellent all-new digital reverb; rebias potential to 6L6 valves

CONS It's a hefty box to lift and carry; a simple aux in would have been a useful addition (though you can stream audio in via USB)

EPIPHONE JOE BONAMASSA 1963 SG CUSTOM
£1,499

WHAT IS IT? Chinese-made Epiphone version of one of the blues-rock superstar's favourite Gibsons, complete with three pickups, Vibrola tailpiece and dark Wine Red finish

Red Devil

Epiphone's collaboration with blues maestro Joe Bonamassa continues unabated, with this sexy take on one of JoBo's own favourite axes. But is a grand and a half just too grand?

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Olly Curtis

The first decent guitar that this reviewer put his pennies away each week for was a white SG Custom, inspired by Alice Cooper's original guitarist Glen Buxton on the band's rendition of *Under My Wheels* on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. The SG never materialised, but that's another story. While Buxton's Custom was the later 1966 to '71 style with the large scratchplate, Joe Bonamassa's own SG comes from the middle of the 1961 to '66 era, with the small pickguard and 'lyre' engraved long Maestro Vibrola that appeared in '63, just as the twin-cutaway Les Paul model changed its name to SG.

A faithful recreation of its Gibson forbear, our Epiphone features a two-piece mahogany body with chamfered edges and pincer-like horns, the lower a touch shorter than the upper. Into this is glued a one-piece, slim-taper mahogany neck topped by a single-bound, block-inlaid ebony fingerboard with 22 medium-fine frets.

Joe's own '63 Gibson has a relatively unusual neck join, where it tapers smoothly into the body without the usual step. Over the years Gibson tried various methods to give this notoriously weak point greater structural integrity, and while one doesn't see too many like this, it is a genuine Gibson appointment. The Custom's headstock is the short Epiphone design that suits

CUSTOM
TREBLE
VOLUME
VOLUME
Epiphone

1. The three Epiphone ProBucker pickups are wired so it's bridge and middle in parallel in the centre position. It sounds out of phase, but actually it's not

2. Epiphone's short headstock style is quite close to that of Gibson, and suits the SG well, and with the 'split H' pearl inlay and gold waffleback tuners it's an opulent proposition

it very well. The 'split H' pearl inlay is a bold statement, but the five-ply headstock binding is dark orangey yellow as opposed to the creamy white of the neck binding. Apparently, this is to reflect Joe's own '63, but it does look a little odd.

Powering the Custom are three Epiphone ProBucker pickups – a slightly higher-output 3 at the bridge and twin 2s in the neck and middle positions. ProBuckers are wax potted and feature nickel alloy covers and sand cast Alnico II magnets. Although made in China, their spec is very close to that of Gibson's own pickups. A nylon-saddle LockTone tune-o-matic style bridge and Epiphone-engraved 'lyre' style Vibrola tailpiece complete the picture. It's all gold-plated, too, making this one of the most opulent guitars around ("Don't even look!").

Of the various switching options available on a three-humbucker guitar, which obviously include neck and middle pickup combined, or middle humbucker on its own, Epiphone instead opted for bridge and middle together, wired in parallel. Due to their close proximity, and the lighter tone that the SG's construction naturally brings, far from being an odd choice this proves to be a masterstroke. More of which later.

Although finished in ubiquitous Eastern Asian polyester, here the Chinese factory has done a brilliant job of making it not look thick and plasticky. It's smooth, glossy and, to be honest, we didn't think twice about it being nitro or not. The mahogany grain shines through the dark Wine Red stain, really complementing the white pickguard and matching 'Custom' plate, sited between neck pickup and fingerboard to hide the otherwise visible neck tenon.

Overall, we reckon Epiphone, with serious input from Joe, has done a cracking job of putting this guitar together.

The body's relatively light mass and delicate build give it a vibrancy that you just don't get from a Les Paul

3. This engraved lyre-style Vibrola tailpiece was introduced in 1963, the same year as the Les Paul SG became just SG. Some find it big and bulky for the moderate amount of wobble it provides, but it does look mega!

4. Joe's own Gibson SG on whch this Epi is modelled features this unusual streamlined neck joint. With the neck joining the body at its 22nd fret, top-end access is total

3

4

Feel & Sounds

Some guitarists find it troublesome adjusting to how an SG's neck protrudes from the body the way it does. Others don't get on with a middle pickup – for example, Ritchie Blackmore lowers his Strat's second single coil as he feels it gets in the way. Other players simply find big, bulky vibrato systems too intrusive, especially when they lend only a mild wobble to chords or melodies. Put all three together and you can see how an SG Custom might be a bit of a challenge to some guitarists.

However, a little time spent adjusting to all three and one quickly finds a guitar like this immensely rewarding. In truth, unless you're a real digger-inner, the centre humbucker shouldn't be a problem. Switching from, say, a Strat to a PRS, everyone knows that there's some reconfiguring of how you pick and wobble. And by the time you've overcome these issues you've probably forgotten that your SG's 15th fret is where the 12th usually is!

Speaking of frets, on our Custom they're medium verging on fine, but with the guitar's smooth ebony 'board, 304mm (12-inch) radius and slinky neck, bends and vibrato are not an issue. And with that totally free expanse of pearl-inlaid ebony laid before you, the fretboard is a playground for exploration – even at its highest reaches, especially with this neck's smooth transition into the body.

Plugging into our ever-faithful Laney Lionheart 20, we are reminded how satisfying the clean clank of an SG can be. The body's relatively light mass and delicate build give it a vibrancy that you just don't get from a Les Paul. The bridge pickup is strong and strident, while the neck is either Les Paul lite or fat Strat, depending on how you view it. With the selector in the middle we find some very interesting tones. Rather like a Strat's positions 2 and 4 on the blade switch, the proximity of neck and bridge humbucker to each other makes for a tone that's pleasantly vowelly, a little bit Strat-ish, and you could find a use for it in a host of funky rhythm, picked arpeggio and straight strumming scenarios. While you could be forgiven for thinking they are out of phase, Joe tells us they are not.

Whack up the Laney's wick and 'both pickups on' is Glen Buxton's *Under My Wheels* tone. Flip to the bridge and it's instant Angus Young, or The Doors' Robby Krieger if you back off slightly. Go to the neck and it's hard not to rush straight for the *Sunshine Of Your Love* riff – indeed, Clapton nicknamed his SG 'Sunny' after the song. And when you consider how much you can do with twin volume and tone controls, you'll see there's a ton of great sounds here, certainly more than on most Gibson-type guitars.

Two volumes, two tones and a three-way toggle switch running three humbuckers. There's a lot of tones on offer here

EPIPHONE JOE BONAMASSA 1963 SG CUSTOM

PRICE: £1,499 (inc plush 'goldenrod' lined case with Epiphone and Joe Bonamassa graphics)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: 2-piece mahogany with chamfered edges
NECK: 1-piece slim-taper mahogany with unusual smooth neck to body joint, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.022mm
FINGERBOARD: Single-bound ebony, mother of pearl block inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Epiphone LockTone tune-o-matic bridge and Maestro Vibrola vibrato/tailpiece, Kluson waffleback tuners w/ 'tulip' buttons – gold plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: 2 covered Epiphone ProBuckers (neck and middle), covered Epiphone ProBucker 3 (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.54/7.8
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Gloss dark Wine Red polyester

Gibson
www.gibson.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Beautifully built with top quality materials, electrics and hardware; a stunner that sounds like something costing much more, and is way more versatile than its looks might suggest; a great collaboration

CONS Some will think £1.5k for a Chinese-made SG is a bit rich; SGs simply don't agree with some guitarists, while others find triple-humbucker guitars too much of a challenge

Verdict

The elephant in the room is, of course, the Custom's price. But while £1,499 seems a lot when compared with other Epiphones, and especially when you can find Gibson's own SG Standard for a similar price online, there really is a lot of guitar here. Materials are all fine quality, including the real ebony fingerboard with genuine mother-of-pearl inlays, top-notch parts such as Kluson 'waffleback' tuners, a proper Vibrola, and three of Epiphone's excellent ProBuckers with CTS pots and Mallory capacitors. It comes in a classy hard-shell case with 'Bonamassa, Nerdville, CA' stencilled on the top, and, of course, we can't forget the input from the man himself, a player we know is fastidious about how his guitars look, play and sound.

It's true that SGs divide opinion, as do three-humbucker guitars in general and big, bulky vibrato systems. But whatever your view on it, and whether or not you think the price is on the high side, we have to concede that between them Epiphone and Bonamassa have created a stunning looking guitar that not only makes a powerful visual statement but which also covers pretty much any musical base you can think of. So while you might not think so at first sight, this is a very versatile guitar indeed.

> Epiphone and Bonamassa have created a stunning looking guitar that covers pretty much any musical base

But let's hear what Mr Bonamassa has to say about his latest collaboration with Epiphone. "They've done a great job," he exclaims. "If you're gonna recreate a guitar, you've gotta do it right. The quality control is so good, and so consistent, that the guitar you receive is gonna play and sound exactly like this one. And, probably a good thing for some people, it doesn't say my name on it, anywhere!"

Check out Joe's excellent video on the Epiphone website, where he explains the origins of the guitar and demonstrates it against his $50,000 original. If you're yet to be converted to the joys of the SG experience, we think this could well do it.

Naff or cool? We sit in the latter camp. What's more, it's a quality case!

FT341, FN15-AR & FT340-BS LIMITED MODELS

FT341

FN15-AR

FT340-BS

Three distinctive dreadnoughts. Rare and beautiful tonewoods. Exquisite craftsmanship and detailing. Retro inspired amplification. Limited run of 300pcs worldwide.

Takamine

TWO NOTES CAPTOR X SE
£499

WHAT IS IT? Celebratory edition of Two Notes' reactive load box pre-loaded with Anniversary Edition vintage cab DynIR models

Digital Vintage

A special edition of the popular load box celebrates 15 years of Two Notes digital innovation

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

1. The Captor X SE's satin brown finish and amber grille light add vintage-approved visual mojo to complement the 32 pre-loaded vintage cabinet DynIR models from top names including Hop Pole, Diffusion Audio, Black Bear and Mirador

2. The front and rear panels are the same as the standard version, with all the connectivity and control we've come to expect from a product that's so widely used it's almost a *de facto* industry standard

3. The Captor X SE's XLR balanced outputs send studio-quality room emulations and effects to your console for live or studio use. There's also a handy ground lift switch to remove the annoying hum caused by ground loops

4. As with the regular Captor X, you can edit, save and load up to six of your favourite DynIR presets, available for recall either by MIDI or the front-panel Preset rotary selector switch

While the digital revolution continues to advance, it's also true that not every guitarist wants to give up their prized valve amp. Fortunately, there are ways of giving even the most vintage and basic valve circuits a new digital lease – and a very effective method is to use a load box. One of the best out there is the well-known Captor X from French company Two Notes, whose DynIR system is practically an industry standard. To celebrate its 15th anniversary, Two Notes recently released this special-edition, the Captor X SE, which is even more tempting.

It certainly adds some vintage mojo to the standard model, with a brown enamel finish surrounding the metalwork and a warm amber grille light. On the front panel there's a Volume control, a global Tone control and a control called Space, which widens the stereo sound field. These are joined by a headphones socket, a button switch to vary the input level and a rotary switch to choose between up to six onboard emulation presets.

On the rear panel, you'll find speaker in and out jacks with a three-position level control switch and a stereo pair of balanced outputs on XLR, as well as a useful ground lift switch. Micro USB and 3.5mm MIDI jacks handle external editing and control.

The Captor X SE looks great in its limited-run colourway, but the eye-opener (or should that be ear?) is the superb quality of the DynIR presets, each one of which is equivalent to using 160,000 static IRs. The Torpedo Remote app is a delight to use, with beautiful rendering and visual editing of the Captor's virtual cabs and studio-grade effects. The realism of the virtual environments is stunning, creating in seconds what used to take many hours of studio time.

If any further temptation were needed, the vintage-styled Captor X SE comes with an all-new Anniversary Edition set of 32 matching vintage cabinet models and 10 more once you register, along with 20 presets curated by top session player and influencer Pete Thorn.

Verdict

It may not be the cheapest load box available on the market, but when you add in the fabulous DynIR cabinet emulations and the stereo balanced outputs, this SE version is worth its weight in gold, adding digital flexibility and professional-studio sound quality to any valve amp. If you need to give your amp a lift, especially if you're after vintage cabinet tones, the Two Notes Captor X SE might have your name on it. G

TWO NOTES
CAPTOR X SE

PRICE: £499
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Reactive load box with built-in dynamic IR (DynIR) signal processing and effects
MAX INPUT: 100W RMS into 8 ohms
DIMENSIONS: 128 (w) x 175 (d) x 64mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.3/2.9
CABINET: Alloy/steel
CHANNELS: 1
CONTROLS: Output level, voicing, space, input level switch, preset select switch, speaker out level control
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: MIDI and USB connections, Torpedo remote control via Bluetooth app
OPTIONS: Many extra DynIR cabinet packs available to registered users
RANGE OPTIONS: Standard Captor X model costs £399

Two Notes Audio Engineering
+33 (0)484 250 910
www.two-notes.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Vintage-flavoured version of industry standard digital load box; tempting choice of virtual cab models and presets; Torpedo Remote app

CONS A little pricey (but you get what you pay for, it's a class act)

MXR M309 JOSHUA AMBIENT ECHO
£269
WHAT IS IT? Digital delay pedal with a range of features for ambient echoes

Rack 'Em Up

A new delay pedal from MXR is a rare event, but this fully featured soundscape generator is worth the wait

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. Press the Trails switch to enter (buffered bypass) Trails mode (LED lit up red). This will allow the repeats to trail off naturally when you hit the bypass switch, rather than be cut dead
2. Pushing the Echo 2 switch engages a second delay set by default to a quarter-note (LED lights up blue). You can change the rhythmic value of this delay by turning the division knob while holding the button down
3. A bypass footswitch in normal use, this can be pressed and held for one second to become a tap tempo switch. It will revert to bypass function five seconds after the last tap, or you can exit tap mode by another press/hold

Tuned by Jeorge Tripps to deliver the sort of iconic soundscapes created by vintage rack-style processing, so says MXR, the Joshua Ambient Echo features rhythmic delays with an optional second echo, modulation, octave voicing on the repeats and tap tempo. The new pedal is set up by default as mono in/mono out, but it can be switched to stereo output. While there is the expected trio of Delay Time, Regen (Feedback) and Mix knobs, you can also set the delay time via tap tempo from the pedal itself or an external tap footswitch. A Division knob sets the rhythmic tap value of the repeats so you can have a straight quarter-note, dotted eighth note, eighth note, eighth-note triplet or a double delay with an eighth note and a dotted eighth.

Things get more complex if you engage the front-panel button that brings in a second set of repeats (Echo 2), set by default to a quarter-note but changeable to another value along with other adjustable parameters. The upshot of all this is that there's a great selection of multitap patterns to be found onboard, which can be used as prominent Edge-style rhythmic delays or as a diffuse trail of spacey, ethereal ambience.

Adding further to the sonic stew is a Modulation knob that moves from subtly dusting the repeats to rich pitch vibrato, while the Voice knob progressively mixes in a blend of three octaves – one down and one and two up – that thickens the texture of the repeats and can sound like a shimmery organ pad embedded in the trail. There's also reverb that's adjustable as a secondary parameter.

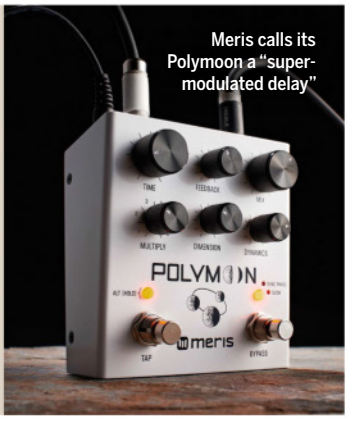
For performance scenarios, you can plug in an expression pedal to control all parameters simultaneously, or there's also the possibility of using an external tap switch to freeze the delay lines at maximum feedback, giving you a bed to play over.

Verdict

The M309 Joshua Ambient Echo is a feature-packed pedal that belies its compact size. At its most basic, you can set the Joshua to its quarter-note division and use it like any traditional delay pedal, with the 50 millisecond to one-second delay times covering all your standard applications. While that confirms it as a practical purchase, it's all the other features that make it an especially creative pedal, encouraging you to dive in and explore with a set of controls that will dial in an outstanding range of atmospheric, textural delays – all with onstage adjustment on the fly.

THE RIVALS

We really are spoilt for choice when it comes to delay pedals, including plenty that provide lots of different delay types, but here are a few that may be of interest to anyone liking what they see in the Joshua, albeit all in larger formats. The Strymon DIG (£359) offers two simultaneous delays and features five rhythmic subdivisions and three dual-delay routing options. Pigtronix describes its Echolution 3 (£269) as "a multi-tap stereo modulation delay offering a myriad of sound design options". Also check out the Meris Polymoon (£299), a multiple-tap delay that's inspired by cascaded rack gear and has a range of modulation choices.



Meris calls its Polymoon a "super-modulated delay"

MXR M309 JOSHUA AMBIENT ECHO

PRICE: £269
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Delay pedal
FEATURES: True or Buffered (Trails) bypass, 50ms to 1000ms delay time, tap tempo, stereo output (with TRS cable), adjustable low pass filter in the delay feedback
CONTROLS: Delay, Mod, Voice, Regen, Division, Mix, Echo 2 switch, Trails switch, CTR mode switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard TRS output, CTR input
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 250mA
DIMENSIONS: 64 (w) x 110 (d) x 50mm (h)

Westside Distribution
0141 248 4812
www.jimdunlop.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Compact size; great range of straight and esoteric delay sounds; practical feature set; tap tempo; expression pedal capability; optional stereo output

CONS While welcome, a range of 12 secondary functions accessed via pressing and holding buttons can be a bit fiddly

FIRST PLAY

BEETRONICS NECTAR TONE SWEETENER
£215
WHAT IS IT? Overdrive and fuzz in one box "handmade in California by a swarm of bees", so says its maker

Double Dose

Beetronics' latest will expand your pedalboard dirt options with drive and fuzz in one small pedal

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. Use the toggle switch located on the top of the pedal to change between Drive and Fuzz modes
2. The left LED (white) indicates that you are in Drive mode, while the right LED (blue) indicates Fuzz mode. These work even when the pedal is bypassed
3. Some may have mixed feelings about knobs located like this, but there is the advantage that you can't accidentally adjust them with a clumsy foot. The white stripe lets you see from above where they're set, except in extreme low and high settings

If you asked us to describe Beetronics' range of pedals thus far, the overarching theme would be 'quirky'. The pedals are not just visually and sometimes physically adrift of the norm, but they can be a little niche in the sonics that they provide, too. And that's no bad thing!

The company's latest offering in its Babee Series of diminutive pedals, the Nectar, is described as a "tone sweetener" and still has the eccentric visual look and form factor. But in terms of its range of sounds it's aiming more for the mainstream. That said, this is Beetronics after all, so what we've got is the unusual prospect of having both drive and fuzz in one single-footswitch pedal. There is no footswitching between the drive and fuzz sounds – that's undertaken by a toggle switch situated on the end of the chassis. Both sounds are tweaked by Volume, Honey (gain) and Taste (tone) knobs, the latter offering plenty of scope in setting up the sound to best match your rig.

The Drive side of things starts off in clean boost territory, but it can run to the sound of a raunchy driven amp. As soon as you kick it in, there's a substantial roll-off in bottom-end, and there's a dip in the midrange that gives it a nice Fender-ish flavour. It'll add an edgy grit to clean sounds or go beyond to a practical solo boost for driven amps – all nicely dynamic, too.

However, the Fuzz is an altogether fuller-sounding prospect, fat and noticeably louder. If you were to use both sounds in an onstage set, you'd probably need to tweak the knobs as well as flip the switch between songs. It sounds great, though, and is capable of some typical 60s fuzz sounds but nothing really extreme, as the Taste knob tempers things in an appealing range, and there's a nice clarity here with every note in a full chord ringing through. Overall, Fuzz mode offers dirt for everyman, delivering both fuzz and distortion that could slot into a whole range of musical genres.

Verdict

This is a great utility pedal to have on your 'board, something that could really increase your sound's scope by virtue of its two different voices. While there's no reason it couldn't be your main dirt pedal, the Nectar would certainly fulfil a practical role stacked as a supplementary effect to bring in a little extra when needed.

BEETRONICS
NECTAR TONE SWEETENER

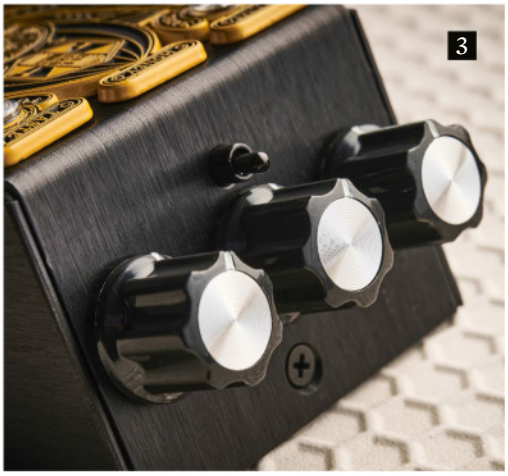
PRICE: £215
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Drive and fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Honey, Taste, Mode toggle, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 30 mA
DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 120 (d) x 50mm (h)

FACE bvba
+32 3 844 67 97
www.beetronicsfx.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Compact size; both drive and fuzz in a single pedal; cool, intricate graphics

CONS Some may not like the knob placement



THE RIVALS

One other small pedal that will give you drive and fuzz in a similar fashion is the Way Huge Smalls Pork & Pickle (£199). It's marketed as a pedal for bass players but may do the job for you. There are also some multiple-footswitch options. Empress Effects' Multidrive (£319) offers fuzz, overdrive and distortion sections that can be used singly or blended, while the Green Carrot Comfortably Plum (£200) is designed to give you David Gilmour's dirt sounds in a pedal – one section is based on a Ram's Head Big Muff, while the other gives you the sound of a Colorsound Powerboost.

Empress's Multidrive lets you blend drive, distortion and fuzz

theWishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

Vintage V52 ProShop Unique Black Icon with Bigsby £1,199

CONTACT **JHS** PHONE **0113 286 5381** WEB **www.vintageguitarsrus.com** WORDS **Dave Burrluck** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

This Wishlist section is usually reserved for high-end guitars that few (aside from the very well heeled) can afford. So, what are we doing writing about a Vintage lookalike? Well, a couple of years back the UK-designed brand introduced its ProShop concept where the team takes one of its Eastern Asian-made standard models and puts it through a makeover at its parent company's HQ in Leeds. This means you can get a good-looking 'relic' of a familiar model – or indeed a custom-colour finish – way below the cost of the real deal. And the 2023 range of stock 'Unique' models certainly displayed a diverse range of custom guitars, of which this Black Icon with Bigsby is one.

While it started life as a standard Vintage V52 Icon, the model's finish has been stripped off and replaced with a white undercoat and black nitro top-coat (which, in this case, has been heavily aged). The one-piece maple neck gets a gold ProShop logo and goes through the time-machine (along with the metal parts, including that Bigsby B50 vibrato), before it's assembled using Wilkinson parts and pickups. There's also a kill switch added for good measure.

Relics always divide opinion, of course, especially the apparent accuracy (or not) of the wear. In fact, it's become a bit of an art form. Our Black Icon certainly creates the illusion of having had a pretty hard life, modded along the way with a bit of DIY refinishing. The hardware, not least that Bigsby, looks like it's been in a garden shed for a few years, too, although the white scratchplate appears to be a more 'recent' addition.

Each ProShop also goes through a detailed setup – and it's hard to find fault here. The vintage-style frets have been lightly levelled and perfectly polished, and there's a light, fast playability. Intonation is good, too, thanks to those compensated saddles, although we wouldn't have been surprised to find heavier strings and a tougher action. In fact, with that Bigsby onboard, we hear quite an open steely voice from the Alnico WVTB at the bridge, contrasted by some percussive warmth from the WVTN at the neck, and bouncy jangle with both combined. It's possibly more rockabilly and country than the hardcore punk that the wear and that kill switch might suggest.

Importantly, while these one-off ProShop Unique models show off the concept, you can also create your own specification via the Custom Build programme. Which is exactly what we've done – and you can see the results in a full review in our next issue. G

1. You can imagine quite the backstory here – the chipped 70s-looking original finish appears to have been rescued from a barn fire and subsequently restored. Or whatever!

2. The ageing of the metal parts, particularly the Bigsby B50, is so well done that we're tempted to pull the parts off, give them a rub with some fine wire wool and oil them. The compensated and very antique-looking Wilkinson WTB saddles are a nice touch

3. The neckplate is also heavily weathered, while the 'over-sprayed' top-coat nitro is already cracking – probably done with a fine knife, rather than temperature. It has a solid weight of 3.74kg (8.23lb), too

1

2

3

4. For stock or dealer builds, the ProShop models mix up relics with unreliced custom colours. If you create your own, you can invent a backstory of which the finish is just one part. As to hardware and parts, again, that's down to you, although obviously fitting a set of Bare Knuckles, for example, over the standard Wilkinson pickups will affect the overall cost

5. The control plate here is reversed so that red-topped kill switch sits where the tone control would have been – there's just enough room to put the tone where the volume was and squeeze a volume control in between. Thankfully, the wiring is neat...

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

New Year, New Gear From £77

CONTACT **Various** WEB **See below**

It's that time of year again, where we start feeling all festive. Taking time to be with our loved ones, unwrapping all the surprises... No, we don't mean Christmas (that will have passed, hopefully without incident, by the time you read this). We mean our gear. You see, somehow it's now 2024, which means we're getting a glimpse of the releases from the imminent NAMM Show. In fact, we've brought you more GAS than the boiled sprouts you didn't eat. The turkey might be out of the way, but it's never too late to wish you Happy New Gear! **[SW]**

BOSS RV-200 **£259**
You can never have enough reverb. So says Boss, as it arrives with a 200 Series pedal we think we'll be hearing a lot about over the next 12 months. The RV-200 is looking to be the long-anticipated multi-mode answer to your ambience hunt. It's got 12 modes, including the regular room/hall/plate/spring you might expect. But it gets more exotic with Shimmer, Lo-Fi, Reverse, Slowverb and the brand-new Arpverb. This mode gives you arpeggiated-style pitch-shifted reverb tails: hit a note, let it dance and go and have a bite, as they say. Elsewhere, it's got 127 memories, Boss's Hold, Warp, Twist and Fade functions, plus MIDI I/O and more.
www.boss.info

HARLEY BENTON DIY GUITAR KITS **From £77**
Bargain guitar-maker Harley Benton has announced the release of five more of its popular self-build guitar kits. The new additions include a Thinline T-Style, MB Bass and two left-handed models (ST and TE). Most curious, though, is the 'Square' kit (pictured), which leaves the body as a slab of wood ready for you to apply your own shape to it. Each kit comes with all the components you need to assemble the guitar, and the bodies are pre-sealed ready for lacquer finishes to be applied. Prices start at just over £75, and you can get them from Thomann.
www.harleybenton.com

FENDER LIMITED EDITION BRUNO MARS STRATOCASTER **£3,149**
In a perhaps unexpected twist, Fender has announced the release of the Limited Edition Bruno Mars Stratocaster, in collaboration with the US pop songsmith/Silk Sonic member. His signature model comes with an ash body in the bespoke Mars Mocha Heirloom nitro finish, complete with American Ultra contours. The neck is maple, with a 21-fret, 241mm to 305mm (9.5- to 12-inch) compound radius maple 'board, and the pickups are Custom Bruno Mars single coils. It comes in a Fender hardshell case and you'll also receive a three-ply mint green scratchplate, along with a custom leopard print strap.
www.fender.com

JHS NOTAKLÖN **£99**
If Ikea made a pedal, well... we'd have something other than bargain hot dogs to look forward to each trip. The next best thing is JHS's new NOTAKLÖN, which borrows the Scandi flat-packer's DIY ethos (and naming convention) for a tongue-in-cheek nod. It's a solderless, assemble-it-yourself overdrive based on a You Know What. JHS has built in the 'Shamrock' mod circuit that it performed on the Klon KTR, adding 4dB of gain alongside an additional kick to the mids from an extra gain stage. It even includes a tube of 'goop' (to conceal your diodes). Is it April already?
www.jhspedals.info

TAYLOR BEACON **£47.50**

At some point, we've all had a headstock guitar tuner, haven't we? But we've never owned one that can also function as a metronome, timer, countdown clock and flashlight. That's exactly what the Beacon from Taylor can do, and there's not a smartphone in sight. The USB-rechargeable battery powers a bright LCD display that can cycle through the five modes. The tuner has preset modes for guitar, bass, ukulele and violin, as well as functioning chromatically, and there are 12 time signatures and a tempo range of between 30bpm and 208bpm for the metronome. Meanwhile, the two 'clock-based' modes allow you to time your set or songs, or count down from up to 100 minutes. Finally, there's a bright LED on the back that can illuminate a dark stage floor. It's out now, from your preferred Taylor retailer.

www.taylorguitars.com

PRS MT 100 **£1,599**

What's massive, sort of heavy and loud enough to fill an arena? Tremonti and Creed are back at it, so what better time than now for a new MT amp from PRS? This 100-watt monster has three channels (Clean, Overdrive and Lead), each with its own dedicated preamp valves, making for a whopping eight 12AX7s, with four 6L6s taking care of the power stage. We're promised pristine cleans, thick distortion with huge bass (without the mud) and a versatile drive channel in between. Each channel also has its own three-band EQ with Presence control, there's an effects loop on the back, and it comes with a footswitch.

www.prsguitars.com

ALSO RELEASED

PRS 'DEAD SPEC' SILVER SKY £3,495

When he's not inspiring guitarists everywhere with his solo output, John Mayer fills his time as a member of Dead & Company – at least he did until the band announced The Final Tour, which took place during the summer of 2023. Now, to mark his time with Dead & Co, Mayer has teamed up with PRS again for a limited version of his popular Silver Sky model, labelled the 'Dead Spec'. Paying homage to Jerry Garcia's 'Alligator', this Silver Sky features a swamp ash body, with a Moc Sand nitro finish seeping into the grain.

At the headstock end, it's fitted with a brass nut and string retainer bar, and the bridge is a modified PRS Gen III vibrato, bolted down to perform as a string-through-body hardtail. But the real fun sits at the jack socket, where PRS has fitted an Alembic Blaster active preamp, engaged by a toggle switch, and offers between 3dB and 14dB of boost via an internal trim pot. Only 1,000 'Dead Spec' Silver Sky guitars are being made.

www.prsguitars.com

ACLAM THE MOCKER £299

We're big fans of Aclam here at *Guitarist*, with pedals such as The Windmiller Preamp and The Woman Tone providing faithful recreations of some classic Who and Clapton guitar tones, respectively. Aclam has already turned its attention to the Fab Four's Revolver/Sgt Pepper-era Vox UL 730 amp tones with the Dr Robert, and now it's back with The Mocker, which is focused on fuzz. Here, the UL 730's fuzz circuit has been recreated with new-old-stock Philips OA200 germanium diodes (the same found in The Beatles' amps), with added Volume, Tone and Bias controls to give extra versatility. There's one catch, though: Aclam only has enough diodes to make 200 units, so The Mocker is a limited edition.

www.aclamguitars.com

THE LINEUP

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: Twain

Album: Noon (Keeled Scales)

Noon by Twain is out now
twain.bandcamp.com

Virginia-born Mat Davidson, who goes by the name Twain for his solo work, has a long history of playing with acts such as Big Thief, The Low Anthem and The Deslondes, among others. For *Noon* – his most recent solo album – he puts in the work and plays guitar, keys, strings and wind instruments. Percussion and bass are performed by Austin Vaughn and Ken Woodward, so overall it's a simple setup. "I've been making albums for a long time, so some practices have been well established," Mat says. "We play live together, with no computers, only a few takes and no splicing of takes."

Itinerant Instrument

This minimalist style links with Mat's view of the guitar, an instrument he began exploring in his teens. "I remember learning to play *Boy Named Sue* [Shel Silverstein], and *Love In Vain* [Robert Johnson]," he says. "Songs opened up a whole inner world for me, and from then on I was always carrying a guitar or some stringed instrument. [The pull was] this feeling of having a tool and travelling with it. In high school my thing was to board municipal buses at random and get lost. Or I'd hike for miles and drop down into unfamiliar towns. I'd wander around and play and meet interesting people. Having an instrument gave me a sense of belonging."

Mat Davidson: "Having an instrument gave me a sense of belonging"

PHOTO BY MALERIE DAY

Sweet Pickings

Mat's guitar playing is graceful and engaging, switching from flat-picking to fingerstyle and back with ease. "I often think about how Louis Armstrong would compare musical notes to fruit on a tree – just reach out and pluck them," he says. "It's like that for me, except it often feels like I suddenly have no hands, or that I have a shifting numbers of fingers. I've been playing music for two decades and still these challenges crop up. I guess part of my style is locating the grace within any present state, no matter how hard it is to grasp the fruit."

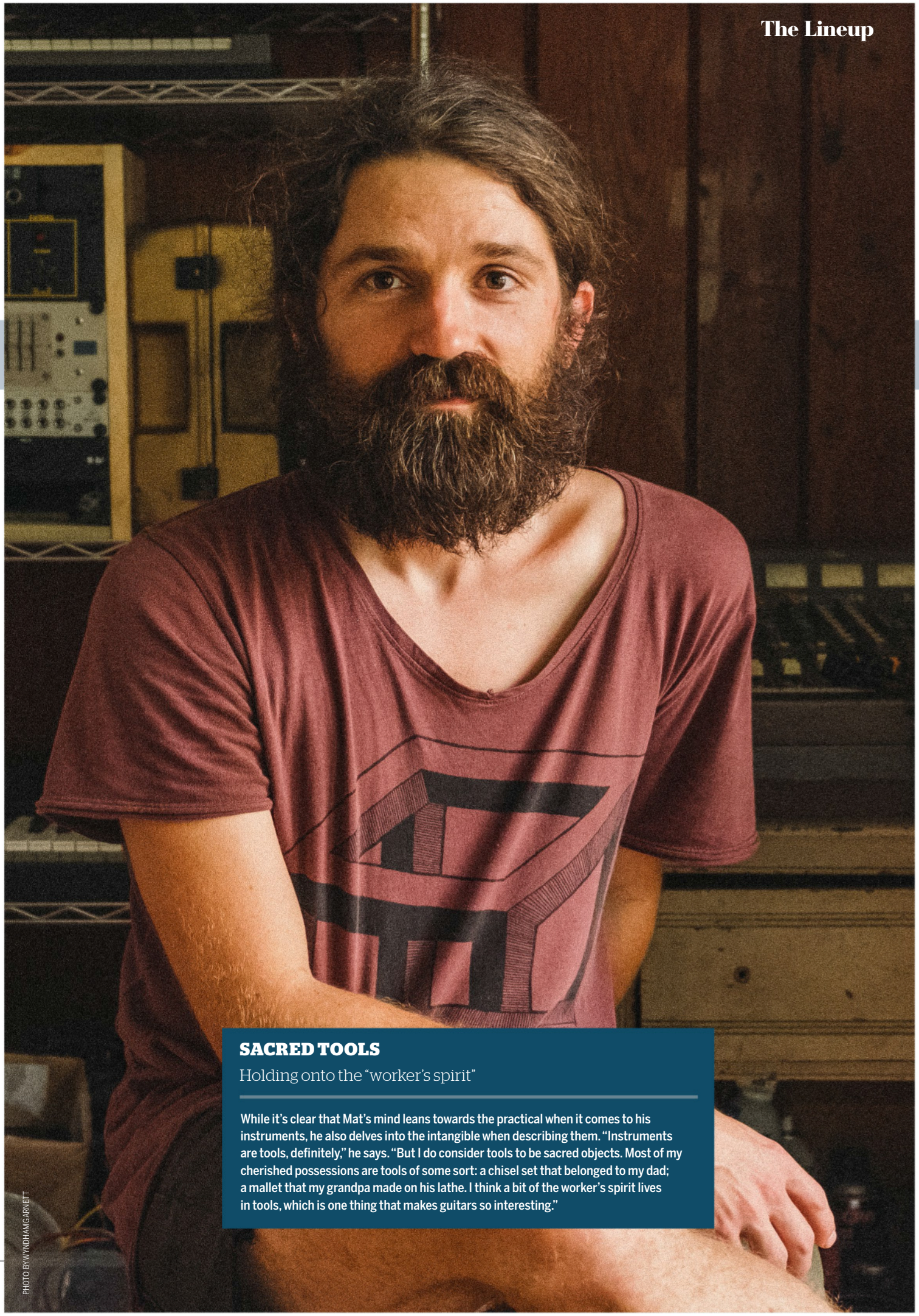
One & All

Mat has played in some influential outfits over the course of his career. But with his own music, he'll sometimes play on his own and sometimes play with a full band. The variety works well for him. "I love and need both," he says. "Music saved me from a lonely existence and now it's teaching me how to relate to others and how to relate to myself. Life has gently and not so gently pushed me in and out of bands. It used to be confusing and frustrating – now I see it as a blessing. I love to share energy with others and search within, and I feel lucky to get to travel between those two poles."

Constant Companion

The frequency of travel is literal as well as figurative for Mat, so it's hardly surprising to learn he keeps his instrument list quite short. "My Twain touring guitar right now is a Yamaha FG-150 with a Sunrise pickup – that's like a Honda Civic," he says. "But the special guitar is probably my pedal steel, a 90s Carter Starter that my friend Tommy Bohlen gave to me. It's been passed down by a lot of players and it feels a bit mystical. I've done a lot of work on it, replacing parts as they break; machining new parts when replacements don't exist... Doing that work taught me so much about the instrument. It's also taken me to some incredible places and I've used it on some amazing records." **[GK]**

Standout track: *The Magician*
For fans of: Devendra Banhart, Andrew Bird, Tyler Ramsey (Band Of Horses)



SACRED TOOLS

Holding onto the "worker's spirit"

While it's clear that Mat's mind leans towards the practical when it comes to his instruments, he also delves into the intangible when describing them. "Instruments are tools, definitely," he says. "But I do consider tools to be sacred objects. Most of my cherished possessions are tools of some sort: a chisel set that belonged to my dad; a mallet that my grandpa made on his lathe. I think a bit of the worker's spirit lives in tools, which is one thing that makes guitars so interesting."

PHOTO BY WYNDHAM GARNETT

THE LINEUP

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax

Gong's latest album takes you on an "ecstatic voyage to witness aural supernovas explode, galaxies die and clocks reset..."

PHOTO BY LAYLA BURROWS

Gong
Unending Ascending
Kscope (available now)

8/10

Earth's favourite space rockers return with another helping of psychedelia

Psychedelic rock has seen many forms over the decades with variety and colour being a driving factor. And within this rich landscape, folk-rock – as much as prog-rock – is openly embraced. Gong have been going since 1967 with the late Daevid Allen originally at the helm. There have, of course, been many other musicians involved along the way, including Steve Hillage, as well as a brief period in 1976 with Allan Holdsworth. In their role as festival sweethearts, Gong quickly established themselves as forerunners of the so-called Canterbury Scene alongside Caravan and Hatfield And The North.

Fast forward to now and the line-up features five musicians – with Fabio Golfetti and Kavus Torabi on guitar – and the music maintains its eclectic mix of folk, pop, rock, jazz and ambience. The eight tracks are quite a journey and stylistically evoke many decades from the dreamy 60s to 70s rock, right through to modern electronics. Alternatively, consider The Beatles through to Pink Floyd via Frank Zappa as reference points.

Opener, *Tiny Galaxies*, is wonderfully psych-rock with shimmering guitar picking, harmonics and a roaring guitar solo. *My Guitar Is A Spaceship* is a powerfully angular riffer with great vocals complete with saxophone and Fabio's trademark *glissando* playing (his whammy bar shimmering the fretboard). *O, Arcturus* features a lead solo full of savvy key centre switching with great articulations, while *All Clocks Reset* is loaded with semi-clean guitar riffing, lead phrasing and punchy tension. As far as rocking out is concerned, *Choose Your Goddess* is sure to be a blast live with its diverse dynamics and root-♭2nd movement. Ascending indeed! **[JS]**

Standout track: *My Guitar Is A Spaceship*
For fans of: Steve Hillage, Ozric Tentacles, Van der Graaf Generator

Peter Gabriel
i/o
Real World (available now)

9/10

The prog maestro returns with his first new release in two decades

For the past 12 months, at every full moon, Peter Gabriel has released one new track from his first solo project in 20 years, but at last the songs are among us as a complete collection. *i/o* (pronounced 'eye-oh') finds him in a reflective mood with the emphasis on elegiac ballads. And whereas previous albums have taken new directions each time, this one appears to look back over his long career as a potent force in progressive rock. As an example, *Playing For Time* here recalls the mood of *Here Comes The Flood* (1977) from his first solo album, and *Road To Joy* is reminiscent of *Kiss That Frog* from *Us* (1992). Surrounded by a core of familiar musicians that includes David Rhodes on guitar and Tony Levin on bass, the album isn't short on grandeur. Available in two different mixes – light and dark – *i/o* tantalises the senses and teases the emotions. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Love Can Heal*
For fans of: Genesis, Marillion

Ida Mae
Thunder Above You
Vow Road Records (available now)

8/10

Americana duo kicks up the dust

The third album from husband-and-wife duo Chris Turpin and Stephanie Jean Ward is a confluence of influences. They cite artists such as Free, Led Zeppelin and English folk music as inspiring their individual take on Americana – but, in fact, that term doesn't really sum up the music we find here. Deciding to record the album as live as possible in the studio and using first or second takes means that tracks such as *Into Your River* have an immediacy and subtle drive to them. Chris plays both gentle acoustic and barnstorming fuzzed-up electric on this album – *American Cars* acting as a perfect example of the latter, with *Lost On Your Time* highlighting the former. But the mainstay here is the maturity of the writing and the interplay between guitars and vocals, as well as sublime production. There's an outstanding depth where different layers reveal themselves on repeated listenings. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Wild Flying Dove*
For fans of: Chris Whitley, Larkin Poe

Hannah Wicklund is winning on her new album

PHOTO BY JAMIE GOODSELL

Hannah Wicklund

The Prize

Strawberry Moon Records
(release date: 12 January)

8/10

Multi-instrumentalist delivers powerful message

Indie blues-rock leanings are at the foreground of Hannah Wicklund's new album, with punchy-sounding songs produced by Greta Van Fleet bassist, Sam Kiszka. The strident bop of *Witness* features wonderfully effected guitars among the piano, strings and rhythm section, with the muscular dynamics of *Hide And Seek* propelling the raspy strumming and riffing. *Lost Love* has a drive that will work well live with a big chorus and well-considered guitar arranging, and the electric voice-only performance of *Song Bird Sing* shows just how well Hannah's vocal range is. *Can't Get Enough* is a treat for a great hi-fi setup with a multi-coloured stereo production that evokes Radiohead levels of dynamism. And as for Wicklund's guitar playing itself, *Dark Passengers* shows just what she is capable of. **[JS]**

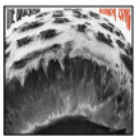
Standout track: *Dark Passengers*
For fans of: Greta Van Fleet, Samantha Fish

The Brackish

Donor Zone

Stolen Body Records

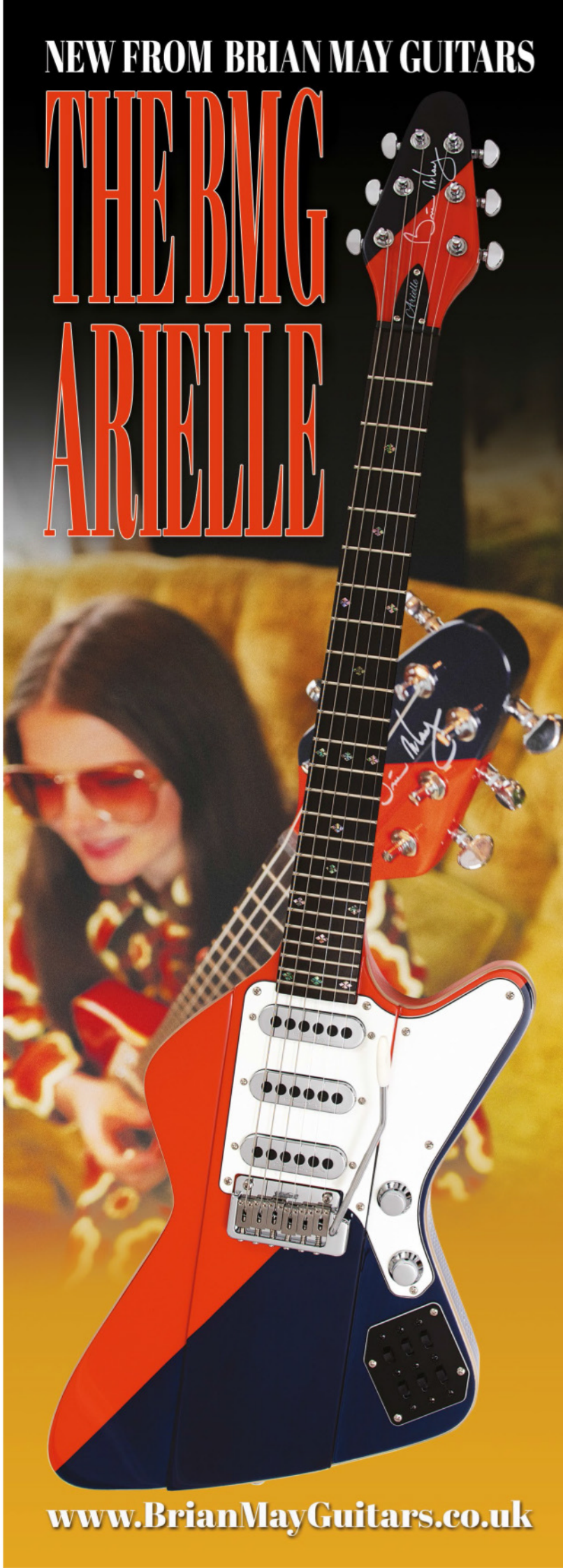
8/10



Deep, instrumental dive into music's dark subconscious

We've been following the progress of The Brackish for a while – primarily because each of their records feels like new sonic terrain as if it had only just formed from the primal magma of music, rather than being built from predictable building blocks. *Donor Zone* is no exception and the fact it features just four tracks should hint at what to expect: evolving, roiling, thundering continuums of sound that occasionally emit flashes of dark humour like lightening bolts in cloud. Polyrhythmic riffs that sound like dystopian Afrobeat dot and dash their frantic morse over throbbing *ostinato* bass on opener *Willox For A New Age*, while Frippian sustained lead lines loom out of the darkness and thunder. There are cinematic, noir-ish touches throughout *J Und J*, while closer *Buabb* brings an angular eccentricity to its strange dance through broken, benighted melody. Immersive, original and good. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Willox For A New Age*
For fans of: Tortoise, King Crimson, Jim Campilongo



THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

Tonemeister **Ariel Posen** stops by the *Guitarist* studios for a chat about his latest album and the long list of guitars he used to make it happen

Artist: Ariel Posen

Album: Reasons Why (Independent Release)

Ariel Posen's latest release finds him taking a fresh approach to songwriting

Many would agree that seeing Ariel Posen live is an unforgettable experience. His understanding of all the elements that go towards creating great guitar tone – whether it be in standard tuning or dropped to the depths of his custom baritone – have gained him the respect of both his peers and audiences alike. His latest album, *Reasons Why*, came out in the autumn of last year and the ensuing European tour saw him playing in our very own backyard. And so the invitation went out for him to join us for a debrief – plus an accompanying video – about his latest venture.

What sort of mindset did you have when entering the studio to record *Reasons Why*?

"The impetus was not to do the things I always do. I've done a lot of 'put tremolo on this, put a lot of fuzz on this...' And it was even more so in the chord changes or the harmony side of things. I tried to run the other way, catching myself each time to say, 'Hey, you've done that a few times already – try something different!'

Ariel took a variety of gear into the studio with him in order to achieve the range of tones on the new album

"I wanted to get more creative with soundscapes and building pads underneath the songs, messing with delays and stuff like that, almost to a point where certain sections sound like there's a broken tape loop that keeps repeating. So there's a handful of songs where I just went crazy with the Chase Bliss and Hologram [Electronics] effects that can make a sound continue on for minutes and just sit there. Find a good loop, then let it record, then put another one onto it and mix it all together. And it turned out pretty cool."

What about songwriting – do you find that comes fairly instinctively to you these days?

"It did at the time because it was at a point where I had my biggest creative burst ever. I wrote 30 songs and chose 10 of them that I thought were the strongest. Songwriting is instinctive, but sometimes, especially when I'm on the road, it doesn't ever hit me because there's too much going on. When I'm in the right mindset and I'm at home, it's like going to the gym; if you consistently do it, it gets easier and easier."

Which gear did you take into the studio for the recording sessions?

"I used my Two-Rock Traditional Clean on everything, except there was one song called *Broken But I'm Fine* where, on the solo sections, I used this Greer Amps Mini Chief. It's a little box that sounds like it's blowing up. That was cool. And there were a couple of songs where I used a rubber-bridge guitar run through a 60s Super Reverb and this old Gibson Explorer amp – I'm not sure of the model – but those two together are magic with the rubber bridge. Everything else was the Two-Rock.

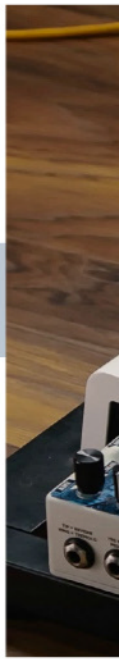
"I brought a few guitars and I used a lot of other random things that were at the studio. I had my Mule S-type guitar, this Fender Eric Johnson Strat I've had forever, my Jazzmaster, and a Gretsch White Falcon, which was used a lot on this album for a lot of the chordal stuff and arpeggios. A Kithara Harland from Ireland made its way onto some of the leads and some other parts, a Josh Williams Mockingbird, which is like a 335-style guitar, and a Case J1. John Case built me this LP-style guitar years ago and it's got Ron Ellis pickups and it just sounds gigantic. So that's on some leads as well.

"For acoustics I used my Collings D1AT for some songs, I used a 60s Martin 000 of some kind, a 60s

"I wanted to get creative, messing with stuff to a point where it sounds like a broken tape loop that keeps repeating"

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS



On the task of transferring the new material to the live stage, Ariel says: "We're always tweaking and changing and listening and seeing how we can improve things"

Hummingbird, my 50s Kay, which is that rubber-bridge guitar, a Morgan Concert model, and a Yamaha dreadnought, which is a Nashville-tuning strung guitar. I have another rubber bridge, which is a modern Recording King guitar, and the Mule Mavis, which is like a resonator but also kind of an electric. Yeah, a lot of guitars were used, I guess!"

We're hearing a lot about players using rubber-bridge guitars at present...

"Yeah, it's definitely becoming the cool thing. I use it very sparingly; it adds a different texture to the acoustic side of things that a straight-up acoustic with steel strings and a mic in front of it doesn't give you.

"It's just another sonic hemisphere that existed this whole time that was going untapped. So now, it's nice to fill in certain spaces with it because it just sounds different. When it's tuned to baritone it almost sounds like *pizzicato* cello. It's really special when it's done sparingly. It's used more for chordal stuff, but it's beautiful on melody lines, too. There's a song called *Choose* where it's used for the bridge melody part. And in *Time Can Only Tell* it's 20 guitar tracks, but a lot of them are acoustics and rubber bridge – it sounds like a string orchestra."

"When I'm in the right mindset and I'm at home, [songwriting] is like going to the gym; if you consistently do it, it gets easier and easier"

What in particular inspired your use of Nashville tuning?

"Nashville tuning is great for recording, usually for doubling acoustics. It adds more top-end to the parts and it makes certain parts pop more than they usually do because of that brightness. A lot of acoustics can get lost in the mix and if you brighten them up in post[-production] too much it doesn't quite sound like acoustic after all the compression and processing. So the high-strung gives you almost 12-string sounds, sometimes."

What tunings did you decide on during the writing process for the album?

"Same as always: I really just play in either standard tuning, or B standard and open tunings. So, open E, open D, open C, sometimes I'll [use a] capo [for] open D♭, open E♭. Those are the only ones I play with. I've tried DADGAD, I've tried open G... If I spent time with it, I'd learn it, but it just breaks my brain. Those tunings are enough for me, it gives me enough variety. And if I'm feeling like I'm in a rut with one of them in writing, I can switch to the another one and breathe some new life, so to speak."

You have said that your pedalboard is now pretty much sorted in that it hasn't changed much in the past year or so...

"That's primarily because it just covers the sounds of the songs we play. I've had to adjust some of the sounds for this new record to embellish some of those spatial ambient sounds I mentioned. But it's working. I mean, I always love new pedals and new sounds, but I am very much a, 'Hey, if it works, keep going with it...' type.

"In the studio, I have a way bigger 'board and I take a big bag of pedals. I take a lot of stuff just to go, 'Hey, how does this sound?' You have to compress it down and make a compact version for playing live. It comes down to what is consistent, what sounds good and what holds up. Even if it's not exactly the sound or the pedal from the record – you know, the pedal I liked might be too big and won't fit, literally. So I have to use something else. But I'm always trying stuff out when all the new things are coming out."

Watch Ariel's soloing & slide masterclass at **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

Ariel talks about his preferred use of different pedal combinations, both live and in the studio, in our accompanying video

Were there any new pedal discoveries that you made while recording this album?

"The Chase Bliss Thermae and the Hologram Infinite Jets – I got deep into exploring with those, just because they provided the soundscapes that I've never really experienced before and it was very magical.

"R2R has a pedal called the Vintage Wah and it's a box with one switch and it emulates the sound of a wah pedal at any level. You can have it cocked back all the way and it just stays on that – that sound was cool. I used it on a couple of songs like *Learning How To Say Goodbye* and *So Easy*, and it gives you this really snotty almost out-of-phase sound and that was very inspiring and interesting to use. That would definitely be one of the surprises, I'd say."

After recording the album, the next stage is to play the songs live. Do you find there's a transition there and that songs take on a new life as live versions?

"It's really just going on the road. And we rehearse, obviously, and prepare, but it's been interesting because we've been on tour for a week and a half playing the songs and no-one has heard the songs other than the singles. People are reacting well to things they've never heard.

"It's interesting to see what works and what we can change. But we have to take a full production record and transfer it to a trio. Everyone's put the work in to fill in the sound at times where it's needed and just make it come together. We're always tweaking and changing and listening and seeing how we can improve things." **[DM]**

Ariel Posen's latest album, *Reasons Why*, is available now. See the website for details and tour info ***www.arielposen.com***

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NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

A Country Boy At Heart?

You know when you're prepared for one event, then another is sprung on you? **Neville Marten** recalls two such moments, involving country stars...

Back in the late 90s and early Noughties I was pals with country band Hogan's Heroes, having booked them for various *Guitarist* Shows around the UK. Their bassist, the late Brian Hodgson, was already a mate since we'd worked together in country artist Diane Solomon's band. For years Hogan's Heroes, which were named after their steel guitarist Gerry Hogan, were Albert Lee's UK touring group, also featuring Peter Baron on drums, both of whom remain in the band today. But on two occasions Gerry asked me to stand in when only the band was required.

"During the final song of Marty Stuart's set, a superfast country rocker, he swung round, looked up at me and said, 'Take it!'"

The first time was when we backed Western swing pioneer Hank Thompson at a big country music festival in Peterborough. Hank had a massive hit in 1952 with *The Wild Side Of Life*, as later covered by Status Quo. As I recall we were sent the setlist, with keys, and so on. Numbers included *The Wild Side*, plus *A Six Pack To Go*, *Rub-A-Dub-Dub* and *Wake Up Irene*, all huge chart-toppers for Hank.

We had no rehearsals. Hank simply rolled up with his guitar to soundcheck. It was then we realised he had a sense of timing all his own. We had no idea when the chords were changing, or where the next verse began. We'd learned the songs from the records, and this was totally different. Surely a catastrophe would unfold?

Gerry suddenly motioned to us, "Watch his thumb, watch his thumb!" Hank was in front with his back to us, and Gerry sussed that said digit moved just before Hank changed chord. It was brilliant! We were saved! We played a storming set and Hank loved it. Sadly, he passed away in 2007.

Telecaster Trainwreck

On another occasion the Heroes invited me to help back country megastar Marty Stuart when he came over to MC and headline the inaugural Great British Country Music Awards at Birmingham's Pebble Mill Studios in 1995. As before, we received a setlist, but this time met up with Marty for an afternoon run-through. It involved me playing rhythm, with Marty, a spectacular country guitar and mandolin player, on lead. I did get to harmonise a couple of lines with him, which was very cool. Marty could not have been a more generous musician and utter gent. He tutored us superbly, we sorted out the songs and I think by the time we were done it didn't sound half bad.

Marty brought along his prototype Parsons/White B-Bender Telecaster and showed me around it. Since the mechanism was on the outside, not built in as they later were, it was about four inches thick, and with a Strat pickup (likely a '54) at the neck. Marty bought it from Clarence White's wife, Susie, and said it still had the same dirt and stickers on it as when White last used it. Marty debuted the guitar on *Saturday Night Live*, backing Johnny Cash.

Come gig time the band found ourselves stuck on a high corner platform, with Marty jutting out on what's called an apron, below us. He powered through the set, holding an enraptured audience in the palm of his hand with superb vocals and truly dazzling guitar. I was feeling good on my own 1963 Tele through the supplied tweed Peavey Classic amp. But being on back-up rhythm I had no need of overdrive or other effects, so it was just Tele, cable, amp. *Very* clean!

During the final song, a superfast country rocker, Marty swung round, looked up at me and said, "Take it!" Completely off guard and with the totally wrong sound I fumbled out my rubbish country licks, sounding less like Brent Mason and more like Perry. Marty must have cringed, but he's such a gent that he said absolutely nothing, but simply thanked us for doing a great job.

The lesson for me was, prepare for more than you think may be needed. Why didn't I practise a few country solos, take pedals and set up a killer lead sound just in case? Lesson for the day is: should you ever find yourself in a similar situation, do your prep and you'll avoid the trainwreck that I brought completely on myself.

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

Bend It

What? Certano Le Carré Low Palm Bender **Where seen?** https://certano.fr **Price?** $224

Since Fender does not currently build a B-Bender Tele I hunted around and found this. When Frenchman David Certano realised that learning pedal steel was a bridge too far (sic), he decided to design a string-bending device for lap steels and Tele-type guitars. The result is the Le Carré Low. Beautifully made from polished aluminium, it attaches with two screws and can raise the pitch of your G and B strings from a semitone to two tones. It comes with a paper template, full instructions and Certano will ship it worldwide. So if you fancy doing a Jimmy Page, a Bernie Leadon or indeed a Clarence White, what are you waiting for?

PHOTO COURTESY OF CERTANO

Guitarist

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CONFESSIONS OF A LUTHIER

Pain In The Neck

This month **Alex Bishop** takes apart a 40-year-old acoustic guitar. But the question is: can he put it back together again?

If you are the owner of an acoustic guitar, the words you never want to hear your luthier utter are 'neck reset'. These days innovative bolt-on neck designs have become commonplace, but most decades-old handmade acoustics are likely to have traditional dovetailed joins, combining tight-fitting joinery with the power of glue to withstand a lifetime on the road.

A neck reset is normally the course of action required when all other options have been exhausted; it is one of the most invasive repairs carried out by a guitar luthier. Essentially it involves removing the neck completely from the body, and fitting it back on again at a different angle. However the resulting change in geometry provides an opportunity to not only improve the sound but also improve playability.

"A neck reset is one of the most invasive repairs and involves removing the neck from the body and fitting it back on again at a different angle"

The guitar in question was a 1984 Fylde acoustic, a beautiful-sounding instrument with a troublingly high action. The height of the strings is controlled by several factors, the obvious one being the height of the saddle. But in this case the top of the saddle had already been lowered to a fraction above the top line of the bridge, so reducing it further was out of the question.

A bowed neck caused by decades of string pull is another common cause for an unplayable instrument, normally rectified by simply adjusting the truss rod. However, this Fylde was made back when master luthier Roger Bucknall was using very stiff non-adjustable H-section steel bars, and the neck had somehow bowed despite his forward thinking with this rigid reinforcement. I could plane the fingerboard flat to straighten things out, but this would only further the distance between string and fret. And thus, a neck reset was in order.

Carefully removing the Fylde's neck from its body involved a heat gun, a palette knife, a steam cleaner... and plenty of patience

PHOTO BY ALEX BISHOP

Steaming Ahead

The first step was to detach the fingerboard from where it was affixed to the soundboard, up until the neck join at the 14th fret. I used a heat gun and a thin palette knife, gently separating the rosewood and taking care not to blister the finish with too much heat, nor damage the top by accidentally driving the knife into the wood grain.

The tricky part then came in trying to get at the dovetail join, hidden beneath the tongue of the fingerboard. Most neck joins extend into the body somewhere around the 15th fret, and I was able to confirm this by drilling an exploratory 2mm pilot hole through the fret slot. To my surprise, it was easy to detect the gap between the dovetail and the back of the mortice when the drill suddenly dropped into the body after only a few millimetres of drilling. The same pilot hole would then be used as an access point for injecting hot steam, which could percolate throughout the join, gradually softening the glue and allowing me to ease out the neck – at least, in theory.

My weapon of choice was a steam cleaner from my local hardware store, with a petroleum-grade rubber hose and fine-needle attachment to direct the steam. Once everything had reached the right temperature, I slid the needle into the recess and pulled the trigger. The scene that followed must have looked like a busy Victorian train station, as I was enveloped in a fog of hot steam, and began to wrestle the neck to and fro. Frantically mopping up water as it dribbled out of the heel and pooled on the workbench, I began to wonder whether it would ever release its grip when – clunk! – I found myself holding two separate pieces of guitar.

Steam gently wafted from the void in the top of the guitar body as I stood back to survey the scene. All in all I was pleased – the neck had come away quite cleanly, just a few stubborn slivers of spruce still cemented to the underside of the fingerboard. Now I would need to precisely pare away wood from the heel to completely refit the neck. First, though: tea.

My thanks to Roger Bucknall for providing detailed information about the guitar before I started restoring it. Both the guitar and I would have been worse off without his valuable advice.

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Guitarist

Change Your Tune

Are you condemned to sound out of tune if you can't intonate every string? Or can the compromises be overcome? **Huw Price** finds out

Years ago, I was offered the opportunity to have a Buzz Feiten conversion performed on my acoustic guitar. The process involves installing a new nut with a 'shelf' that lips over the end of the fretboard and shortens the distance between the take-off point of the open strings and the 1st fret. The saddle is also relocated and carved for carefully calculated intonation offsets.

Feiten's tuning system is designed to overcome well-known issues with standard equal temperament tuning, and promises more in-tune-sounding open chords, as well as improved keyboard compatibility. I can report that it performed as promised, but once the novelty had worn off I noticed that the guitar's tone had become thinner and a bit sterile.

Since then, I've observed that acoustic and electric guitars with imperfect intonation can sometimes sound fuller and sweeter than those with individually adjustable strings. So, how can imperfect intonation be compatible with big and musical tonal qualities?

Consider chorus pedals, which duplicate the input signal, alter the pitch and recombine the processed sound with the dry signal to create a bigger and richer tone. Even if you hate chorus as an effect, you probably enjoy double-tracking powerchords and acoustic guitars when recording. The differences in timing and pitch between takes achieve a chorus-like effect, albeit without the naff electronic artificiality that drives some of us crazy.

Three-saddle bridges on vintage-style Teles – such as this Vintera '50s Telecaster Modified model – can limit the intonation adjustment that's available. But some strobe-tuner-assisted tricks can help you out

With analogue multitrack tape, varispeed can be used to run the machine a tad fast on one take and a tad slow on another to achieve a bigger sound. Also consider 12-string guitars. Session player Tommy Tedesco had an anecdote about showing up to a studio date with a six-string acoustic when the producer requested a 12-string on the talkback. He hadn't brought his 12-string, so instead he bounced his six-string on the floor to put it slightly out of tune and then played the part. The producer, who couldn't see what Tommy was up to, declared it was exactly the sound he was looking for.

My point is that most guitars are inherently out of tune to some degree, but (within reason) that can sound pleasing if you know how to work around it. Clearly, intonation adjustment is limited with acoustic guitars, and in that regard, they are similar to certain electric guitar models such as traditional T-type guitars with three-saddle bridges, Gibson-type guitars with wraptails and Gretsches with bar bridges.

Temperamental Teles

Most intonation guides tell you that the fretted note and harmonic at the 12th fret should be identical in pitch. That's achievable with six individual saddles but not with vintage-style Telecasters. Instead, try tuning the open strings and then compare fretted notes at the 3rd and 15th frets. A strobe tuner helps, and you can download strobe tuner apps for smartphones. If the notes sound sharp at the 15th, adjust the saddles further away from the nut, and if they're flat, do the opposite. A few cents sharp at the 15th and a few cents flat at the 3rd can work well, so try splitting the difference.

The G string is usually the main culprit and Tele-meister Jerry Donahue's solution has proved popular. Intonate the A, B and both E strings as closely as possible using the usual 12th-fret harmonic method. Next, set the centre saddle intonation screw so the fretted note at the 12th fret on the D string is slightly flat of the harmonic. In this position, the G string should sound slightly sharp of the harmonic at the 12th fret. Without moving the saddle, retune the G string so it plays in tune at the 12th fret and you're done. With any luck, open E major and minor chords should sound more in tune. These days, there are plenty of compensated saddles to choose from, assuming six-saddle bridge conversions don't appeal, but they're not perfect and the methods described still apply.

Tuneful Top Wraps

Gibson's trapeze and wraptail bridges would have proved slightly less problematic if guitarists hadn't swapped from wound to plain G strings. Gibson did finally introduce the compensated 'lightening' wraptail, but even then it was configured for wound G strings. Luthier

Neil Ivison offers some advice: "You have to find a happy medium," he suggests. "I tend to set the top E dead on, then I set the G as best I can. The lower strings just seem to fall in because intonation issues are less noticeable with those. When I'm making fine adjustments, the G position is sort of a pivot point. There are plenty of compensated wraptail options, but I've had a couple of vintage Gibsons – a 1958 Special and a 1959 Junior – that intonated great even with the original wraptails."

Neil Ivison's Hurricane '59 features a compensated wraparound bridge, but he does note that he's had "a couple of vintage Gibsons – a 1958 Special and a 1959 Junior – that intonated great even with the original wraptails"

"Digital tuners are fine for a baseline reference, but to get your guitar really in tune with itself, you have to learn to trust your ears even more"

Another thing to consider is matching string radius to fretboard radius. I learned this when I was looking to improve the playability of a vintage Gretsch Tennessean and discovered Tru-Arc bar bridges. Consider this when you're upgrading a wraptail or setting saddle height on your T-type, because it really makes a difference.

Bridge and saddle positioning do have a strong bearing on a guitar's ability to sound in tune, but there are other factors at work. Nut slots play a huge part, as do the height and condition of the frets. But some of the responsibility falls on players. When adrenaline kicks in, some of us over-bend or press too hard. Playing a note on a guitar string is not like pressing a piano key, and you have to learn how to play in tune. Hopefully it will become instinctive and allow us to adapt our technique to suit different guitars.

Finally, don't over rely on digital tuners – especially the clip-on headstock variety. They're fine for a baseline reference, but to get your guitar really in tune with itself, you have to learn to trust your ears even more. Before splashing cash on fancy hardware, be mindful that perfectly adjusted intonation doesn't guarantee you'll sound in tune or sound good. G

THREE TO GET READY

Get in the three-saddle groove

Fender Vintera II '60s Telecaster £1,049

Fender's recent Vintera II series views its classic models through a haze of vintage nostalgia. The '60s Telecaster gives us an alder body in surf-tastic Fiesta Red or Sonic Blue finishes, both with vintage-spec 184mm (7.25-inch) radius rosewood fingerboards. Tall frets and old-school pickup voicings meet the three-saddle bridge for an as-authentic-as-possible guitar that'll set you back just over a grand.

Fender Gold Foil Telecaster £1,159

Mini-humbuckers are the guitarist's secret weapon, and it seems this year guitar brands have lifted the lid. Here, Fender proves that it's got the gloves for garage-rock with a pair of Gold Foil humbuckers, three-saddle bridge and three-way switching. It's vintage-style in the same way as your argumentative drunken uncle, rather than your refined grandfather. You can get it in White Blonde or Candy Apple Burst, and get a load of that matching headstock!

Fender American Performer Telecaster Hum £1,389

Borrowing its pickup configuration from a Telecaster Custom but sticking with the traditional scratchplate and control layout is this the Keef-esque American Performer Telecaster Hum. It's equipped with a Fender Yosemite single coil in the bridge position and a Double Tap humbucker at the neck, which can be split via the tone pot. Fender has also included its Greasebucket tone circuit, and it's available in Aubergine, Satin Surf Green, 3-Color Sunburst and Vintage White. **[SW]**

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Finding Triads

Richard Barrett guides you from theory to musicality by choosing a chord and journeying around the fretboard

Though various scales and the CAGED chord approach are the broadest overview of the possibilities that exist all over the fretboard, one of the most common issues players face is how to apply this information in a musical context. These patterns can feel very separate from the business of making music and/or improvising. While it's true to say much of this information (however overwhelming it may seem at first) does infiltrate and inform our playing over the longer term, there's also a case for approaching it from another angle, such as choosing any chord (A minor in this feature) and looking for triads or, in this case, chord shapes around the fretboard.

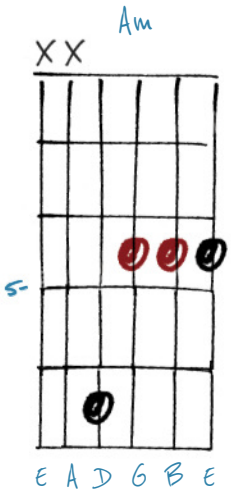
As you go through this process, related scale shapes and CAGED chords will reveal themselves from a different, often more musically intuitive perspective. This isn't really a 'shortcut' as such – it's still dependent on a knowledge of scales and CAGED chords – but I like to think it allows more 'joined-up thinking' when approaching both chord parts and solos or melodies.

PHOTO BY GRAHAM WILTSHIRE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Jimmy Page's inventive use of different chord voicings runs throughout the music of Led Zeppelin

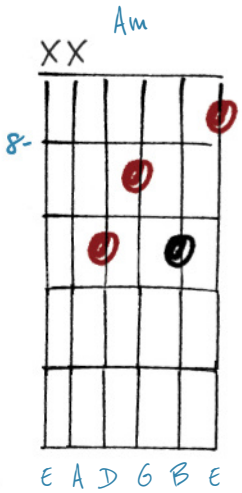
Example 1

I'm skipping the open-position Am as we will be coming back to that an octave higher, so here's another version that contains elements of the Am scale and shape 1 Am pentatonic. You'll also see that this is taken from the CAGED chord shapes, using the Em shape in this 5th position.



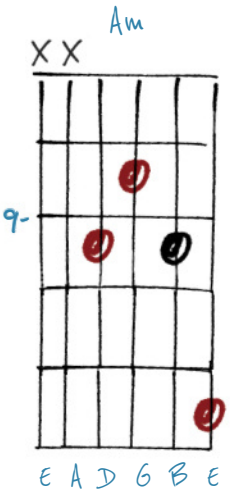
Example 2

Juggling the notes into a different CAGED position, this shape incorporates elements of the shape 2 Am pentatonic and Am scales. You'll no doubt see the similarity to Fmaj7 – part of the same 'family' of chords from this key, commonly used together – so that's worth keeping in mind, too.



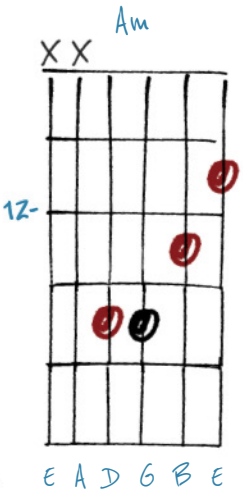
Example 3

By simply shifting the top note from Example 2, we have another Am shape that straddles two positions, based on the Am arpeggio found here. Play an A at the 12th fret of the fifth string, then pick through the ascending notes, also adding a C at the 8th fret of the first string – and there you have it!



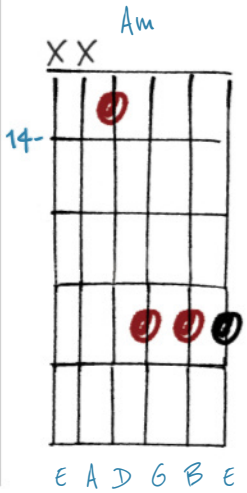
Example 4

Basically the regular open-position Am shifted up 12 frets, this example is clearly a CAGED chord but also draws heavily from the shape 4 Am pentatonic. Knowing this, you could rake across this shape as part of a solo (think Mark Knopfler) or take a non-linear approach to single-note melodies or solos.



Example 5

Like most of the examples, this Am shape contains elements of the shape 4 Am pentatonic and Am scales. It's all how you view it: the line between traditional lead and rhythm playing seems limiting in this context. Move the E on the fourth string up to the 19th fret and we are full circle back to Example 1!



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STAR LETTER

TOTALLY SWAMPED

I've been a long time user of Fender guitars, but, as you can see from the enclosed picture [right], things have changed – and it's all thanks to *Guitarist*. In edition 504 you published details of the new for 2024 PRS SE guitars. I couldn't believe how good the Swamp Ash Special looked with its blue finish coupled to a maple neck.

In a case of, "I don't need it, but I want it", I found one online at Peach Guitars at a reasonable price. My Swamp Ash Special is nicely finished, looks even better than the pictures and sounded quite good right out of the box – but I wanted to make some changes. The pickup selector was way too far back for me (I fully blame Fender for this), and the bridge pickup wasn't quite what I liked. A quick rotation of the controls in a clockwise direction put the switch where I wanted, just leaving the bridge pickup to think about.

Another search online led me to Oil City Pickups' Telecaster bridge pickup in a standard humbucker-sized unit. Ash [Scott-Lockyer] couldn't have been more helpful. He makes all the pickups himself and my Big Block pickup arrived a week later, which was really impressive.

Having installed it, I hooked it up in series with the middle single coil, so they would run as a sort of hybrid humbucker resulting in a usable kind of Strat-alike sound. To be honest, I didn't really like the sounds with the pickup selector in positions 2 and 3 with the tone control pulled up, so I reutilised the pull-up switch to give me the bridge and middle single coils in parallel, as a sort of hybrid humbucker, for positions 1 and 2 and the single coil on its own at position 3.

I can now say that, for me, my PRS SE Swamp Ash Special has really nice single coil and hybrid humbucker sounds to complement the two humbuckers. Colour me happy – at last!

Peter Cooper

Thanks for sharing your tasteful modding project, Peter, in which you have brought about significant and highly personalised changes without, we think, upsetting the aesthetic and utility of the guitar. Great, too, to see the creativity of British pickup makers take pride of place in your design. We wish you plenty of enjoyment from your modified swamp beast – and your new headphones!

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WOODSHEDDING

20 odd years ago, when I first moved to the country, I decided to start growing my own vegetables. I soon discovered that this required a great deal of skill, was relatively expensive and fraught with difficulty and disappointment. During the lockdowns of 2020, when I first got back into guitar in a big way, I decided to have a go at building my own guitar. Like with the vegetables, I soon discovered that this, too, required considerably more skill than first thought, was relatively expensive and fraught with difficulty and disappointment! Given the extraordinary quality of so-called budget guitars these days, I am often left surrounded by wood shavings and sawdust wondering why to persist in such a futile activity.

However, I have concluded that crafting a guitar, however badly or well, gives you enormous insight into how each individual part of a guitar has to be harmonised to create a workable whole, and when it goes well nothing beats those rare moments of joy when you string your creation up for the first time and

When it comes to self-builds, as the saying goes, it's not the destination that matters, it's the journey...

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

Blackstar's *Guitarist* Gold award-winning Amped 2 is converting many a player to 'board-based amps

discover that it's not so bad after all. It might not be a big-brand custom shop, but it's *your* custom shop.

I'd like to take this opportunity to salute all my fellow would-be luthiers out there, toiling away in their 'sheds of dreams', creating instruments for the sheer joy of creation. Long may you continue to make sawdust!

Glenn Holman

Many thanks, Glenn, for your uplifting perspective on why trying one's hand at making guitars, even in an age of cheap-but-good instruments continues to be rewarding. Interesting, too, that while we may feel that a guitar is the end product of such a process, we might equally say that increased understanding is the real product of our fledgling attempts to make a guitar. True, learning the craft involves some monetary outlay – whereas learning new chords or scales takes nothing but application once we've bought a guitar. But building a guitar from scratch places you within the (relatively) small but happy band of people who can make, set up *and* play their instrument. In other words, a headstock-to-endpin relationship with the guitar. It's hard to improve on that – and we hope you continue to enjoy the experience.

AMPED UP

I was interested to read in Neville Marten's article in the December issue of *Guitarist*, that he has been using a Blackstar Amped 2 for his rock 'n' roll gigs. I bought one of these great amps myself after reading the 10/10 review in the June issue. There are such a range of sounds available that it's taken me five months of playing with it to settle on a core sound to use for my gigs with a covers band (with a couple of carefully chosen pedals in front).

Maybe the Blackstar Amped 2 would be a good candidate for a Longterm Test in the magazine? It's such a flexible piece of kit and I would be really interested to hear how Neville has been using his.

Peter J Storey

Thanks for the idea, Peter, I expect Nev would be happy to deliver a Longterm Test report or three on his progress with the highly useful Amped 2. Or at the very least an update or two in his column. The concept of an amp that lives on your pedalboard really has matured and there are so many options these days, including, lest we forget, some old reliable favourites that still have plenty of utility. Only last week we caught up with Kavus Torabi of Gong during a soundcheck in Bristol and he revealed he had gone amp-free on stage, using instead... a SansAmp pedal. We watched him in soundcheck and he sounded great. Who else has converted to a pedalboard amp among our readers? How have you got on with them? And what are the pros and cons, in your experience? Send us your views and we'll print the best.

KEVIN ‘GEORDIE’ WALKER

1958 – 2023

Lost to a stroke in November, Killing Joke’s late guitarist was a seminal sonic maverick whose playing could brutalise and beguile

Words Henry Yates

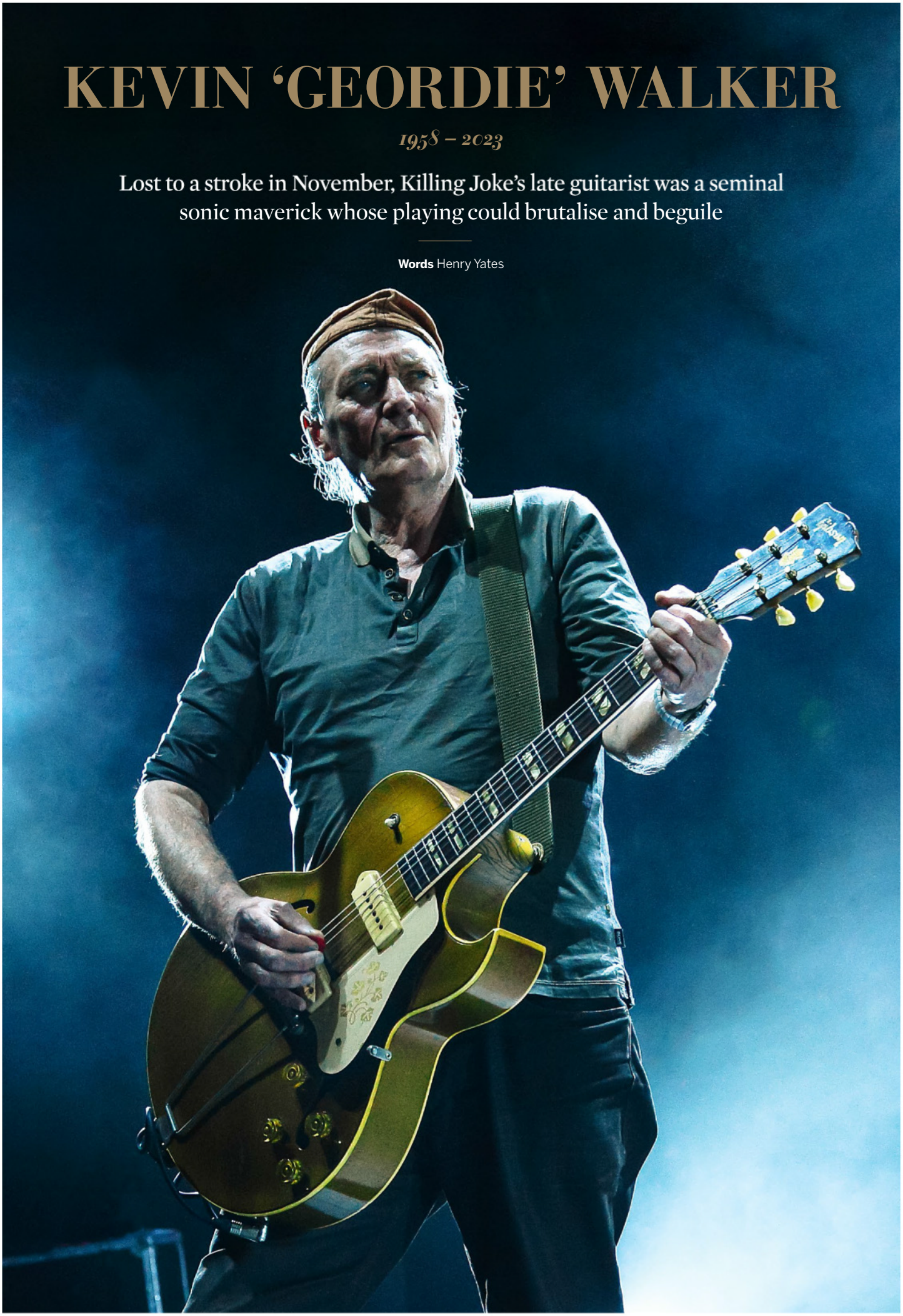

PHOTO BY JIM DYSON/GETTY IMAGES

KEVIN 'GEORDIE' WALKER

18 December 1958 – 26 November 2023

Perhaps Killing Joke's frontman Jaz Coleman said it best. The guitar playing of his lifelong foil Geordie Walker – who died in November after a stroke at the age of 64 – was "like a fire from heaven". From the late 70s, when Walker first took the stage as co-founder of the seminal British post-punk band, the results could be pulverising, shaking your bones, a seismic strain of the heaviest metal. But in the same breath – even the same bar – his guitar work could be a melodic, mellifluous cascade, mobilising pan-generational players in genres from grunge and shoegaze to disco and dub. As Duff McKagan of Guns N' Roses wrote: "Geordie was a true inventor of a massive sound that has influenced so damn many of us."

Surely, no sensible musician would have answered the 'guitarist wanted' advert placed by a proto-Killing Joke in *Melody Maker* (inauspiciously, it offered the successful applicant "total publicity, total anonymity, total exploitation"). But Walker was a square peg, too. Born in 1958, in County Durham (the source of his nickname when he moved down south), the guitarist reportedly turned up at Coleman's door and refused to leave, insisting that his abject inexperience was no barrier.

"This guy kept calling saying, 'Hi, I've never been in a band before, I've only ever played in my mum's bedroom, but I'm the best guitarist ever,'" reflected Coleman. "Geordie moved in three weeks before I actually heard him play."

When Walker did finally put his musicianship where his mouth was – for Killing Joke's nihilistic self-titled debut album of 1980 – his vast soundscapes were unlike anything else on the post-punk scene, and he soon dialled in his signature sound using the unlikely tool of a 1952 Gibson ES-295 with heavy-gauge strings, tuned down to DGCFAD and often paired with a Burman amp and Memory Man. "When you find something that you express yourself through the best, something that is completely your sound," he said in 2016, "why would you use anything else?"

Killing Joke, Camden, 1982 (left to right): Jaz Coleman (vocals), Paul Raven (bass), Paul Ferguson (drums) and Geordie Walker (guitar)

PHOTO BY DAVID CORIO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

> *"Geordie was a true inventor of a massive sound that has influenced so damn many of us"* **DUFF MCKAGAN**

It would be reductive to define Walker's career entirely by his work with Killing Joke. The band's occasional hiatuses in the 90s gave the guitarist time to form star-studded outfits like Murder, Inc and The Damage Manual (he might even have successfully auditioned for Faith No More, said the US alt-rockers' bassist Billy Gould, were it not for "a personality so strong that he dwarfed us").

But most of Walker's standout moments came within the band with whom he recorded 15 studio albums. *Requiem* – the opener of Killing Joke's debut – instantly pricked up ears, its trashy-toned intro nodding to traditional rock 'n' roll shapes but scratching them out with its off-kilter note choices. Fast-forward to the post-millennium and the feedback-trailed groove on 2010's *The Great Cull* seemed too big for the speakers. Even on (relative) commercial high-point *Love Like Blood* – a Top 20 single from 1985's *Night Time* – his delay-soaked riff sounded like a lonely transmission beamed from a dying planet.

All the while, important ears were listening. It's no coincidence at all that Nirvana's *Come As You Are* sounds remarkably close to Killing Joke's *Eighties* (in fact, fanboy Dave Grohl would guest on the band's 2003 *Killing Joke* studio album), while Metallica acknowledged the debt in 1987 with a cover of thrash-metal forerunner *The Wait*. "Geordie was a huge influence on me, the way he played that Gibson ES-295," wrote Kirk Hammett.

And while the British music press usually sniffed at Killing Joke, Walker made his mark on both higher-profile sonic wranglers such as My Bloody Valentine's Kevin Shields ("This effortless playing producing a monstrous sound") and the old masters. When *Classic Rock's* Roll Of Honour presented Coleman and co with the Innovator Award in 2010, it was Walker's long-term admirer Jimmy Page who handed over the gong (the Zeppelin man deeming his guitar tone "really strong, really intense").

Among the guitarists who left us in 2023 – from Jeff Beck and Tom Verlaine to David Crosby – Walker's death in his adopted hometown of Prague might seem like a footnote, his lifetime sales barely touching the sides of CSN&Y's *Déjà Vu*. Yet commercial success is not everything, and for those who happened across his bleak, beautiful, utterly uncompromising guitar work, his passing marks the loss of a voice every bit as vital.

GRETA VAN FLEET

With red-raw third album, *Starcatcher*, rated as the old-soul Michigan rockers' best, Jake Kiszka reflects on banning stacks from the studio, shaking off those Zeppelin comparisons, and the "warfare" with his sibling bandmates back in the family garage

Words Henry Yates **Portrait Photography** Paige Sara

Back in 2018, when Robert Plant was asked which of modern rock's hot tips he rated, the former Led Zeppelin frontman paid the ultimate backhanded compliment. "There's a band in Detroit called Greta Van Fleet. Beautiful little singer – and he borrowed it from someone I know very well. They *are* 'Led Zeppelin I'..."

It was a line the rock press would parrot *ad infinitum* – however reductive it seemed to one of the genre's best young exponents. True, when Michigan twins Josh (vocals) and Jake Kiszka (guitar), along with kid brother Sam (bass), founded Greta in their family garage a half-decade earlier, there was no denying the DNA of classic rock's galacticos in their riff-and-shriek sound. But none of the siblings denied the influence, and the comparison certainly didn't hurt: 2017's *From The Fires* EP won the Grammy for Best Rock Album, while both 2018's *Anthem Of The Peaceful Army* and 2021's *The Battle At Garden's Gate* were glorious interlopers amid the committee-penned pop of the Billboard Top 10.

And as Jake reminds us today, with third album, *Starcatcher* – a record that intentionally prized spit over polish – Greta has put distance between themselves and their 70s touchstones, with guitar work that roams beyond Page's shadow.

You wanted a more 'garage' sound for *Starcatcher*. What was the appeal?

"I think it had to do with spontaneity. In the past, we would usually go out somewhere remote and write in the middle of the woods or in the mountains. And we would typically overdo the demos. They started sounding like a record by the time we got out of there, and sometimes it's impossible to replicate that initial excitement. With *Starcatcher*, by design, we would go directly into the studio with basic concepts and just catch the songs as they would fall. So it was birth by fire."

What are your memories of coming up in the family garage with Josh and Sam?

"Warfare [laughs]. It wasn't all quiet on the western front, I can tell you that. We got a lot of sparring out then. I can look more fondly upon it now – it's somewhat romantic. I remember being a kid playing my first guitar in that garage, and dreaming about the bigger picture and what that might look like. I think that's what we wanted to do with this record – go back and capture that essence. It's a very live record, for that reason, y'know? There's maybe more simplicity within the writing, but in terms of playing guitar live, I think it takes more attitude to pull it off."

"I remember being a kid playing my first guitar in that garage, and dreaming about the bigger picture and what that might look like"

PHOTO BY ERIKA GOLDRING/GETTY IMAGES

1. Double trouble: Jake (right) with his twin brother, Josh, while Jake's double-horned '61 Gibson Les Paul takes centre stage. "I remember watching Eric Clapton in Cream when I was a kid. That felt like an intervention – it was seminal for me"

How has the band's success affected your relationship with your brothers?
"It's actually brought us closer. I suppose the definition of a brother changes when you leave home, and all of a sudden you realise it's you and your brothers versus the world. It becomes a new relationship. I know there's the mythology of so many groups with siblings that have gone to shit. It can be quite a demanding chemistry."

Did you play tough gigs on your way up?
"I remember, we'd play a lot of biker gigs in Michigan, where we'd show up and they'd be running the show with a generator, firing guns off in the air – like a scene out of *Easy Rider* or something. We were all young and it was quite frightening. But they were the type of guys who would always have your back. Like, they'd say, 'If you ever have an issue, give us a call.' One time, a biker gang came to a show in Saginaw, then a rival gang showed up – a fight broke out and we just kept playing."

What are your own favourite guitar moments on *Starcatcher*?
"There's an essence of simplicity to *Sacred The Thread*, but there's just so much attitude. Y'know, the hedonism behind it, the sheer terror behind it – it's aggressive. It was really interesting this time to craft these instrumental parts on the guitar. I had a lot of new milestones, personally. I mean, there's a B-Bender Telecaster on *Fate Of The Faithful*. *The Falling Sky* is in DADGAD, *The Archer* is in open C. Even the orchestral approach to *Meeting The Master* – I kinda felt like I was arranging string parts."

Is experimenting like that a good way to stop your playing becoming derivative?
"I'm always searching to break up rhythm, looking at different genres. Truthfully, if I'm having an issue, being stuck in territory that I've been in before, I might go to classical music. I've legitimately used, like, Mussorgsky's *Night On Bald Mountain* to get me out of sticky situations. Or Chopin. Or Bach. A romantic way of looking at it is that it's kinda like sculpting. It's like, if you're in a situation where you're thinking a riff has been played, there's tons of ways to shape it into something more interesting.

"I know there's the mythology of so many groups with siblings that have gone to shit. It can be quite a demanding chemistry"

"There're so many layers to a riff. If you play *Seven Nation Army*, you're close, but it's not exactly like Jack White. Because there's nuance. There's attitude. There's soul. And then there's the heart, the head and the strings. Everybody's gonna do it differently. That's another fascinating thing – I love to watch people play my guitar pieces and see their interpretation of them."

What were your core guitars on this album?
"It was pretty bare bones – but it was a lot. It was really eclectic. This friend of mine, the owner of Chicago Music Exchange, I told him I was doing a record and asked if he would send some guitars down. And he

“There’re many layers to a riff. There’s nuance, attitude, soul. Then there’s the heart, the head and the strings. Everybody’s gonna do it differently”

said, ‘Sure, I’ll load a truck and send down about 20 extremely interesting vintage instruments.’ So we got to RCA Studio A, which is this giant studio in Nashville – Elvis and Sinatra records were done there – and I put all of these guitar cases on the ground, all strewn out. I opened all of them. And then we’d go song by song.”

What was the best of the bunch?

“He sent down the fourth 335 that was ever made. It actually destroyed every guitar that [producer] Dave Cobb had at the studio. He wanted to buy it. I wanted to buy it. And my friend was like, ‘Well, it’s like a museum piece so you can’t.’ There were old Teles, I used a Strat for some of these solos – I would just walk up, grab a different guitar, and it would be completely random and I would just work with it.

“It was part of my process on this record. I wasn’t just using the ‘beloved’, if you will, my number one, the ’61 Les Paul. I was like, ‘All right, I’m gonna pick a fight with whatever I pick up, and I’ll plug it into something and if it sounds cool, then...’ On this record, it wasn’t me forcing these tones or trying to curate what I could hear in my head. It was the other way round.”

How about your amps and effects on *Starcatcher*?

“I did this on the last record, too, where I was kinda experimenting, playing a guitar solo back and then playing with the pedal knobs while it’s being recorded, so you get all the changing variables. It becomes like a human voice – you can kinda speak through it and it becomes really psychedelic. I used a lot of the Universal Audio stuff and we were having fun pushing preamps

PHOTO BY PAIGE SARA

on the 'board itself. In terms of amps, there was a blonde Fender Bassman and a Princeton 'silverface', both of them vintage. A Magnatone Twilighter and a Vox AC30, which I typically have in the studio for most records. But this record was particularly interesting because I limited myself to only using combo amps."

"I've studied a handful of players [to a forensic degree]. Page. Clapton. Hendrix. It gets into philosophy at some point"

What was the rationale for that?
"I think one reason was the limitation. The other was, a lot of the early great records we all love – those sounds came from just a combo. I've used 4x12 cabinets and heavy Marshall heads, but it almost felt unnecessary – it just moves so much air, even the lower-wattage stuff. The microphone placement on the combo amps was also new for me. It was an objective of mine to make one song radically different from the next. Like, you might get to a song's bridge and it becomes really spatial and outrageous. So it was quite dimensional: I was mic'ing with one up close, one two-foot back, one five-foot back, and then a room mic. And then kinda blending it in. I used probably no reverb on the record. If there's reverb on the guitar, it's actually the studio room itself at RCA."

Your '61 is technically a Les Paul but with the SG body styling. What drew you to that twin-horn format?
"I remember watching Eric Clapton in Cream when I was a kid. That felt like an intervention – it was seminal for me. Definitely Pete Townshend. I had an old cassette of The Who's *Live At Leeds* – the first real guitar I owned was an SG Standard with P-90s, and that's what Townshend was using at that concert. I remember, as a kid, just picking up the SG and liking the weight and tactile qualities. I liked it because it was chunky. My dad would take me to guitar shops and I remember being at a Guitar Center in Saginaw, Michigan. I was playing *Sunshine Of Your Love* on an SG and some older guy came around the corner and said, 'Damn, that was pretty good. I thought you'd be some older guy like me, and you're, like, 14!'"

Would you say the SG has shaken off its image as a heavy metal guitar?
"Man, the lineage of the SG is all over the place. It's kinda popped up in irregular places. I guess, with some guitars, they start becoming synonymous with specific genres. Like, a Jackson or a Dean is gonna be on the metal/thrash side. But the SG, it's one of those instruments that was crafted – like the Les Paul, Strat or Telecaster – at the golden age of guitar. And because the SG has been around for so long, it's kinda ended up everywhere."

You've said you studied Jimmy Page's playing to a forensic degree?
"There's been a handful of guitar players I've done that with. Clapton was one. Hendrix, from the American side. It gets into philosophy at some point. It was like living and breathing a type of guitar player at any given time. Page was one of those guys where if I was playing a Zeppelin track, I would walk through exactly what his thought process was when he was putting that song together. I could think exactly like him, or Hendrix, or whoever. Because if you spend enough time with that stuff, it's like a psychological character study, if you will."

Have you ever met Page?
"I haven't. I've been in close proximity. We were staying in the same hotel in LA and missed each other in the lobby by a couple of minutes. Our manager was like, 'You know who just walked through here? Jimmy Page.' So, close but not quite."

Do you feel like you've distanced yourself from the Zeppelin comparisons with this latest album?
"I think, if you take a common denominator control group, and you ask them, 'What is rock 'n' roll to you?', then Zeppelin and those groups that laid the foundation are the baseline. So our [early] approach was, 'We're playing rock 'n' roll music.' It's what we grew up with. It's what we listen to. It's driven deeply into our DNA. And initially, yeah, the reaction was like, 'This sounds a bit like Zeppelin.' You'd get that reference a lot. I'm sure every rock 'n' roll [band] gets that reference a lot. But time goes on, you get a bit older, there's an evolution in what you're doing, and with *Starcatcher* it definitely sounds like Greta Van Fleet, no doubt about that." G

PHOTO BY NEIL KRUG

2. "The definition of a brother changes when you leave home, and all of a sudden you realise it's you and your brothers versus the world," says Jake, pictured here with his brothers (front, left to right) bassist/keys Sam and vocalist Josh, plus drummer Daniel Wagner (top left)

Greta Van Fleet's latest album, *Starcatcher*, is out now on Lava/Republic

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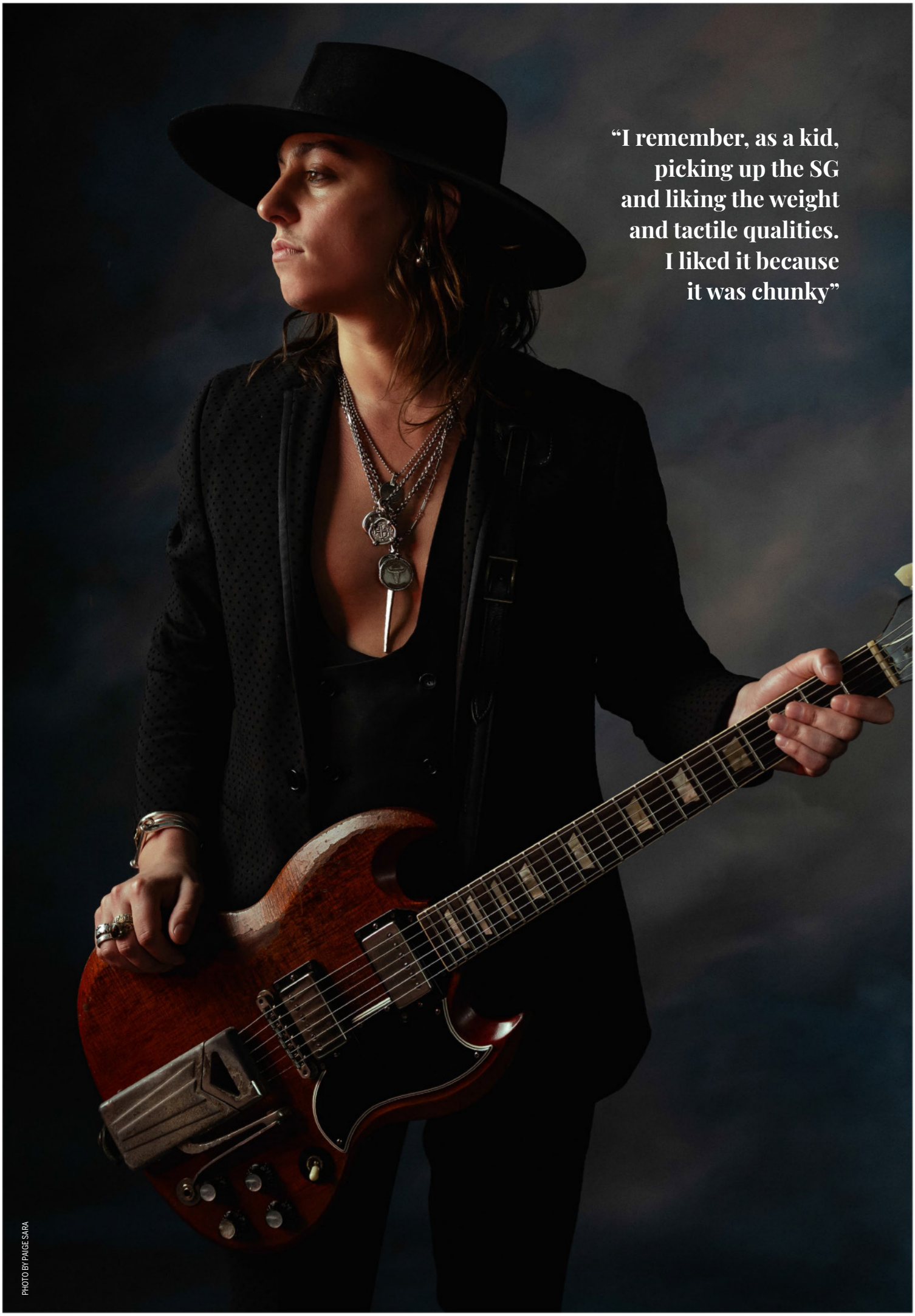
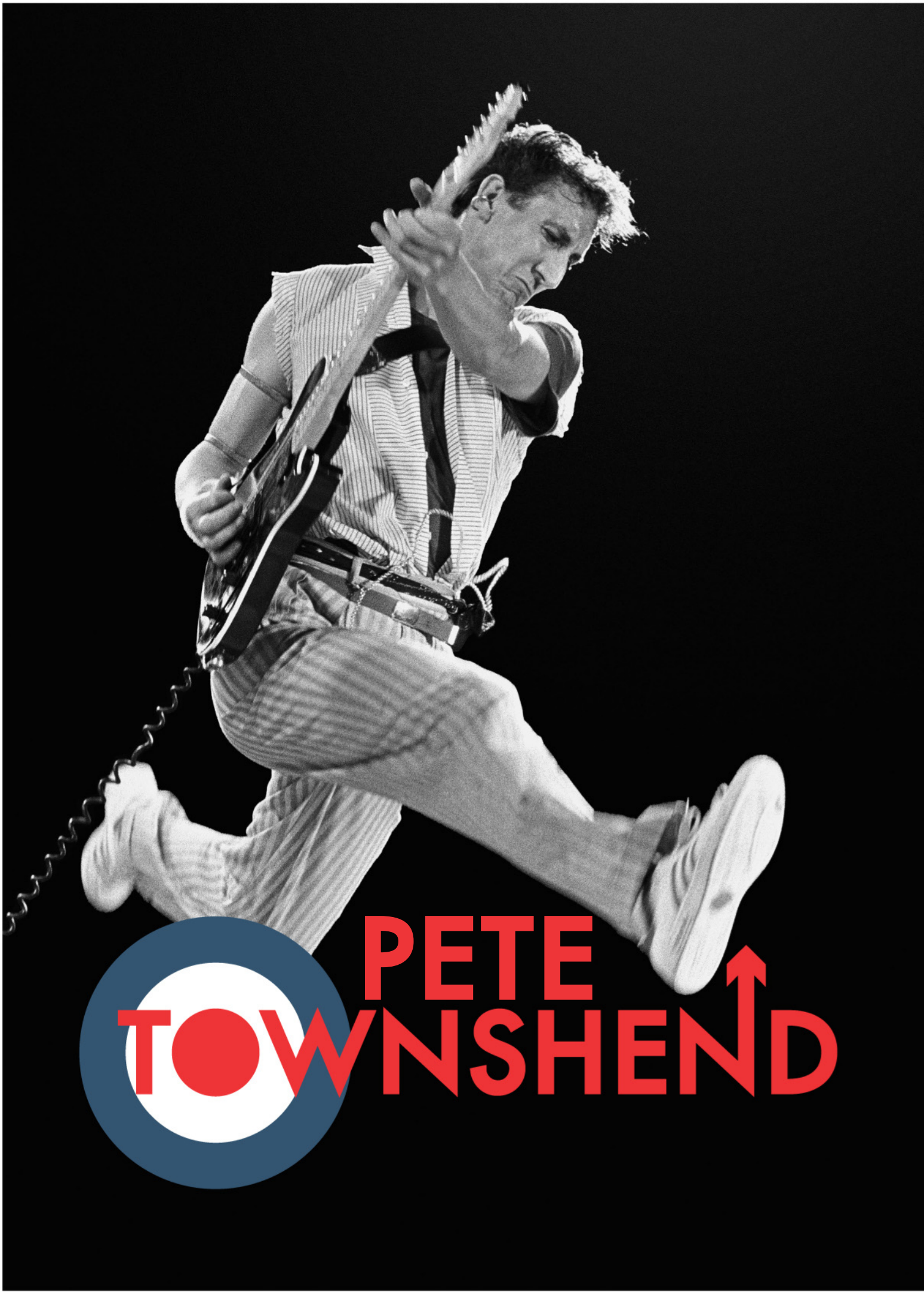


PHOTO BY PAIGE SARA


PETE
TOWNSHEND

In an all-new interview, **The Who**'s chief architect recalls the band's high-water mark, the album that never was, the album that almost wasn't but remains the band's calling card – and his enduring love for the guitar

Words Jeff Slate **Photo By** George Rose/Getty Images

During the golden age of rock 'n' roll, Pete Townshend helped define and redefine both the electric and acoustic guitar several times over. As The Who's guitarist, he pioneered an aggressive, almost punky approach to the guitar in the mid-1960s, at least a decade before punk was a genre. And his rampant destruction of his instrument on stage – which he later attributed to his studies at Ealing Art College of Gustav Metzger, the pioneer of auto-destructive art – became not just an expression of youthful angst but also a means of conveying ideas through musical performance.

"We advanced a new concept," Townshend wrote in his memoir. "Destruction is art when set to music."

It also set The Who apart from just about every one of their contemporaries, but most especially guitarists like Jimmy Page, Peter Green and, of course, Townshend's friend Eric Clapton, who were peddling an English version of American blues back to the country of its origin.

"No-one who saw The Who at that time could deny that they were the best live band going," Richard Barnes, The Who's biographer and Townshend's flatmate at the time, recalled in 2021. "Even the biggest Kinks fan, if The Kinks and The Who were both playing in town, would go see The Who over The Kinks. They were a real show when no-one else was putting on a show. And that catapulted them into that rarified company."

Townshend's aggressive but melodic approach to the guitar, in a style that combined both lead and rhythm guitar, was hugely influential on guitarists from the Sex Pistols' Steve Jones to Guns N' Roses' Slash, and many others. Recently ranked No 37 on *Rolling Stone*'s 2023 list of 250 greatest guitarists of all time, he was also one of the first musicians to use large stacks of amplifiers and feedback as a musical tool, often ramming his guitar against the deafeningly loud speakers.

"Our managers signed Jimi Hendrix to their label and had me take him down to Jim Marshall's," Townshend told this writer in 1993, recalling a trip to the legendary amplifier designer's shop. "At the time I had two cabinets of four speakers each. Jimi bought four cabinets. He didn't *do* my act. He *stole* my act."

"Pete Townshend is one of my greatest influences," Rush's Alex Lifeson, a guitar virtuoso in his own right, said of Townshend's often underrated talent on the guitar. "More than any other guitarist, he taught me how to play rhythm guitar and demonstrated its importance, particularly in a three-piece band."

And as an acoustic guitarist, Townshend's staccato, cod-Flamenco approach and precise rhythm – often doubled with an electric rhythm guitar that pushed and pulled against drummer Keith Moon's brazen drumming – set a bar for players unmatched by anyone save, perhaps, Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones. It's a style of playing born from necessity, as Townshend describes it.

"Keith had spent so long playing the drums, but not being a drummer, being a decorator, being an interpreter, being somebody that created energy around what I was doing, I became very metronomic," Townshend tells *Guitarist* today. "I'm still very accurate."

But it is also a style that owes a huge debt not just to The Who's astonishing live performances of the era, but from Townshend's groundbreaking use of home recording as a way to demo and perfect the songs he was writing for The Who. As a result, Townshend's songwriting developed in leaps and bounds from the aggressive pop of *I Can't Explain* to the mini-opera *A Quick One (While He's Away)* and full-blown operatic aspirations of *Tommy*, which broke The Who as international superstars.

Eventually came the peerless sophistication of the songs from *Who's Next*, perhaps the greatest rock 'n' roll album ever, and The Who at the peak of their considerable powers, as well as the rough elegance and power of Townshend's greatest songwriting achievement, *Quadrophenia*, taking the rock opera as far as it could go.

"I'd got my first really proper 3M tape machine," Townshend today recalls of that home studio-slash-workshop. "And I was using Dolby. I was using Dolby before recording studios were using Dolby. It wasn't innovation, it was just good luck. My company that made studios for people was based next to Dolby on Clapham in London, and so I knew Ray Dolby, and so I could work on my 8-track, but I could also do loads and loads of dumping – combining tracks – so I could add more and more elements."

Endurance Test

On a balmy October afternoon in France, Pete Townshend meets *Guitarist* to discuss *Who's Next*, The Who album that has always, and probably will always, define the band. His piercing blue eyes hidden behind wraparound shades, at 78, Townshend is still as animated as ever when discussing – and defending – his band.

"I don't think we've done a show since the 70s that didn't include at least three or four songs from it," Townshend says.

But *Who's Next* is also The Who album that almost wasn't. With his bandmates, not to mention management who also ran The Who's record label, champing at the bit for a big, bold follow-up to *Tommy*, Townshend, in between dates on a relentless touring schedule, dug in at his home studio – a luxury that was unheard of at the time.

"It rivalled Abbey Road, technically," he recalls, and started expanding his songwriting palette via the latest though ridiculously crude synthesizer technology. The results? *Lifehouse*.

> "I was excited to have these [synth and organ] tools – that excitement translated into some interesting stuff. I was on a real high"

Along with some of the best songs Townshend had ever written – *Baba O'Riley*, *Behind Blue Eyes*, *Bargain*, *Going Mobile* and *Won't Get Fooled Again* would all end up on *Who's Next*; *Naked Eye*, *Pure And Easy*, *Too Much Of Anything* and a host of others would trickle out during the era – over a couple of days in September 1970 he also wrote a futuristic script that foretells a planet on the verge of ecological collapse, with a population locked into virtual reality suits controlled by autocratic rulers and pacified by an endless stream of mind-numbing content.

While that may sound pretty easily digestible, if not downright prescient, today, even in the wake of the moon landing and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Townshend drew quizzical blanks from just about everyone he tried vainly to get onboard. The fact that the plot twist came in the guise of rock 'n' roll being outlawed, leading to a revolt and a stand-off at the Lifehouse, where music had allowed masses of people – who have ditched their "experience" suits – to congregate and merge into a single, universal mind, didn't help matters.

More than 50 years later, Townshend is in some ways still chasing his dream of the *Lifehouse* project, as a massive new 11-disc boxset entitled *Who's Next | Life*

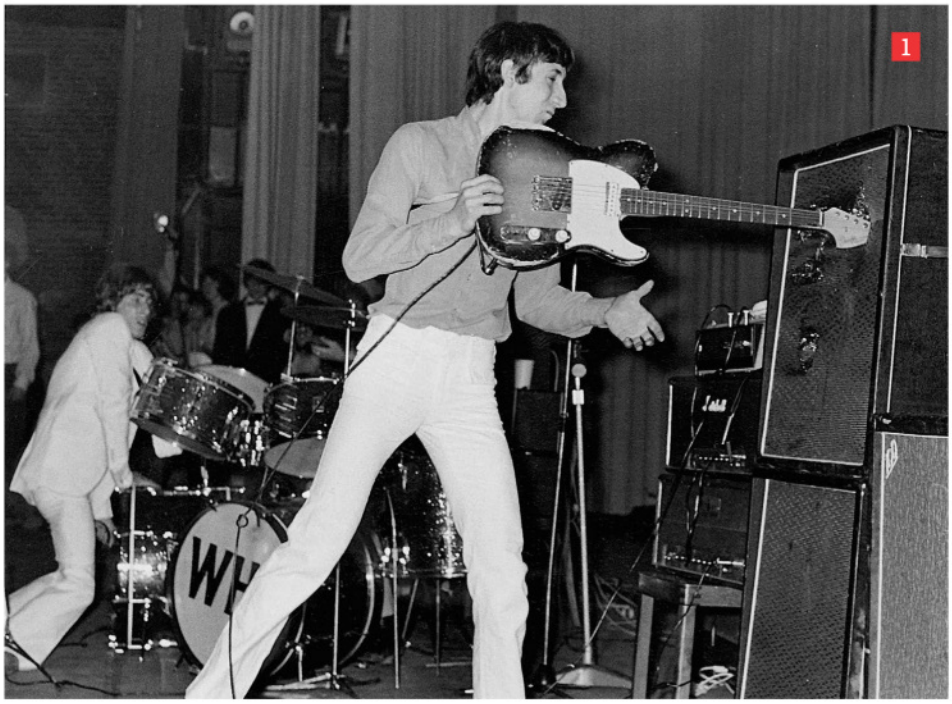


PHOTO BY CHRIS MORPHET/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

1. Another one bites the dust: Pete trashes a hybrid Telecaster on stage with The Who in Germany, 1967

2. Townshend's home studio was well ahead of its time, allowing him to make comprehensive demos of Who material

3. Pete's early flirtation with synths gave an electronic edge to Who songs like *Baba O'Riley*

PHOTO BY CHRIS MORPHET/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

2

PHOTO BY CHRIS MORPHET/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

3

4. A contact strip from The Who's performance at London's Rainbow Theatre in November 1971 shows Pete in full flight!

"[My home studio] rivalled Abbey Road, technically. I'd got my first really proper 3M tape machine, and I was using Dolby before recording studios"

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

House proves, coming complete with a remastered *Who's Next*, loads of Who tracks and a raft of home demos from the era, plus a book by Townshend and Who experts Andy Neill and Matt Kent, and a graphic novel expanding the story of *Lifehouse*.

Along the way, *Lifehouse* was never far from Townshend's mind. He nearly had a nervous breakdown during the early days of the project, barely sidestepping jumping out the window of the Manhattan hotel suite of one of his then managers Kit Lambert. And, after abandoning the *Lifehouse* project in favour of the nine-song single-LP *Who's Next* album at producer Glyn Johns' urging, plus *Quadrophenia* and an aborted rock opera called *Long Live Rock*, Townshend enlisted The Who's singer, and then *au current* movie star, Roger Daltrey, to revisit the *Lifehouse script*. Townshend fleshed out and updated the story with songs like *Slip Kid*, *Who Are You* and *Sister Disco* – which would go on to become Who staples – before giving up again.

PHOTO BY GLISBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

5. The Gibson J-200 has played a role in many Townshend compositions and his enthusiasm for acoustic guitars is still evident today, with Collings, Fylde and Guild instruments in his collection

> "I meet people in the street who say, 'I love *Tommy*.' But that didn't happen with *Lifehouse* because it wasn't complete enough"

Finally, at the turn of the century, Townshend released the *Lifehouse Chronicles* boxset on his own Eel Pie label, which included home demos and even a radio play of *Lifehouse* and a book, and performed two shows in London that once and for all put the pieces of Townshend's massive work into a cohesive narrative.

Still, like Brian Wilson's aborted *SMiLE* and so many other great, lost rock albums, *Lifehouse* was really more an idea in Townshend's head than anything else.

"You're right that, like *SMiLE*, there's a sense of there being a lost concept," Townshend says. "Somebody wrote recently something that feels true but also feels sort of a little bit wonky, which is that *Lifehouse*, as it exists, is an unfinished project, both as an experiment between artist and audience but also as a story, and also as an integrated series of songs that helped to demonstrate and illustrate that story. It's basically just conceptual art. In other words, it's just coming up with an idea, putting it on paper, and then it not happening. And for me, I'm perfectly happy with that idea, but the fact is that there is no set of songs that tell the story. It's a very poetic idea, and that has never really properly come across. So, I meet people in the street, and they say, 'I love *Tommy*, I would listen to it when I was 13 years old, and it changed my life.' And that happened again with *Quadrophenia*, of course. But that didn't happen with *Lifehouse* because it wasn't complete enough. It was just ideas that were unfinished."

In fact, the *Lifehouse* recordings were strewn all over the place. There were songs on *Who's Next*, several on the 1974 compilation album *Odds & Sods*, and across B-sides, like the fantastic *Greyhound Girl* on the flipside of Townshend's 1980 hit *Let My Love Open The Door*. But it wasn't a cohesive project.

And, like Brian Wilson, Townshend had a serious mental breakdown during the making of what eventually became *Who's Next*. The members of The Who were at their most band-like at the time, but the pressure on Townshend, as the creative force and visionary and spokesperson, was intense.

Meanwhile, he kept getting thwarted. Co-manager Kit Lambert wanted to make a *Tommy* movie – so there were competing projects – so Townshend didn't have the man who had helped him realise the *Tommy* project. Very much on his own, even though he had a band that was functioning at its absolute peak, Townshend recalls his frustration as palpable.

As co-producer Glyn Johns recalls in his 2014 book, *Sound Man*, even as late as when he was brought on as producer, Townshend gave him not just a raft of demos but the script for *Lifehouse*. Townshend clearly hadn't given up on his grand concept just yet.

"I was still hoping for a double-album," he recalls. "It became a tough time. But it was also a very important lesson for me. I'd given up, in a sense, on the idea of working with Kit, which was a very big thing. I still had the band, and the band was still behind me. So when Glyn took over, I was hoping that he would make a double-album. That was all. That's why I gave him the script. I sat down with him before, and he said, 'I really don't understand this at all.' And I just remember saying to him, 'Listen. I hope you don't feel I'm insulting you, but you really don't fucking need to. This is my project. Just do what you do.'

PHOTO BY TOM HILL/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

6. The *Lifehouse* project continually evaded completion but gave life to many of the songs on the *Who's Next* album

"I didn't think that we would get to the end of the project and he would decide that the double-album was going to be a single album. And leave off *Pure And Easy*! I remember thinking that was like leaving *Amazing Journey* off *Tommy*. Because it's the song that sets the scene; that gives the story its backbone. Glyn chose *The Song Is Over* instead because it was a good closer to the album. He wasn't thinking about *Lifehouse*, he was thinking about a bunch of songs, and he made the decision based on that. But I decided to trust his instincts and his intuition – because by the time we got to the end of the recording, it was clear that Kit was gone for me, and that there was no way I was going to rescue the movie side of the project. And also, the idea that I might be able to do anything technological with the band had drifted into space. But remember, what we had invented was the use of backing tapes. And they fucking worked! And they worked so well partly because of Keith Moon. He didn't need a click. He was the click!"

Synth Horizons

Townshend's pioneering use of synthesizers, set against that often sparse acoustic/electric combination, gave The Who a new sound to play with, one that was, again, unlike any of the band's contemporaries.

"Because I was in a band with Keith Moon, I just had to hold it down. I had to be a metronomic, clear-cut, rhythmic player"

"It gave us this extra harmonic and musical implementation because we were just a three-piece band," Townshend explains. "We didn't even have a keyboard player. So it enriched our sound. And it was very, very exciting."

Although The Beatles had used a Moog on *Abbey Road* in 1969, when Townshend began writing the demos for what would become *Who's Next*, the use of synthesizers was both unheard of and nigh on impossible.

"Chris Thomas was assigned to help George Harrison figure out how to use the damn thing,"

Townshend says with a laugh, recalling those early synths to be large, unwieldy things. But Townshend was looking to augment the spare yet still relatively grand, guitar-based demos he was concocting.

7. In 1973 Pete managed to coax Eric Clapton out of his drug-induced hermitage for EC's comeback concert at The Rainbow

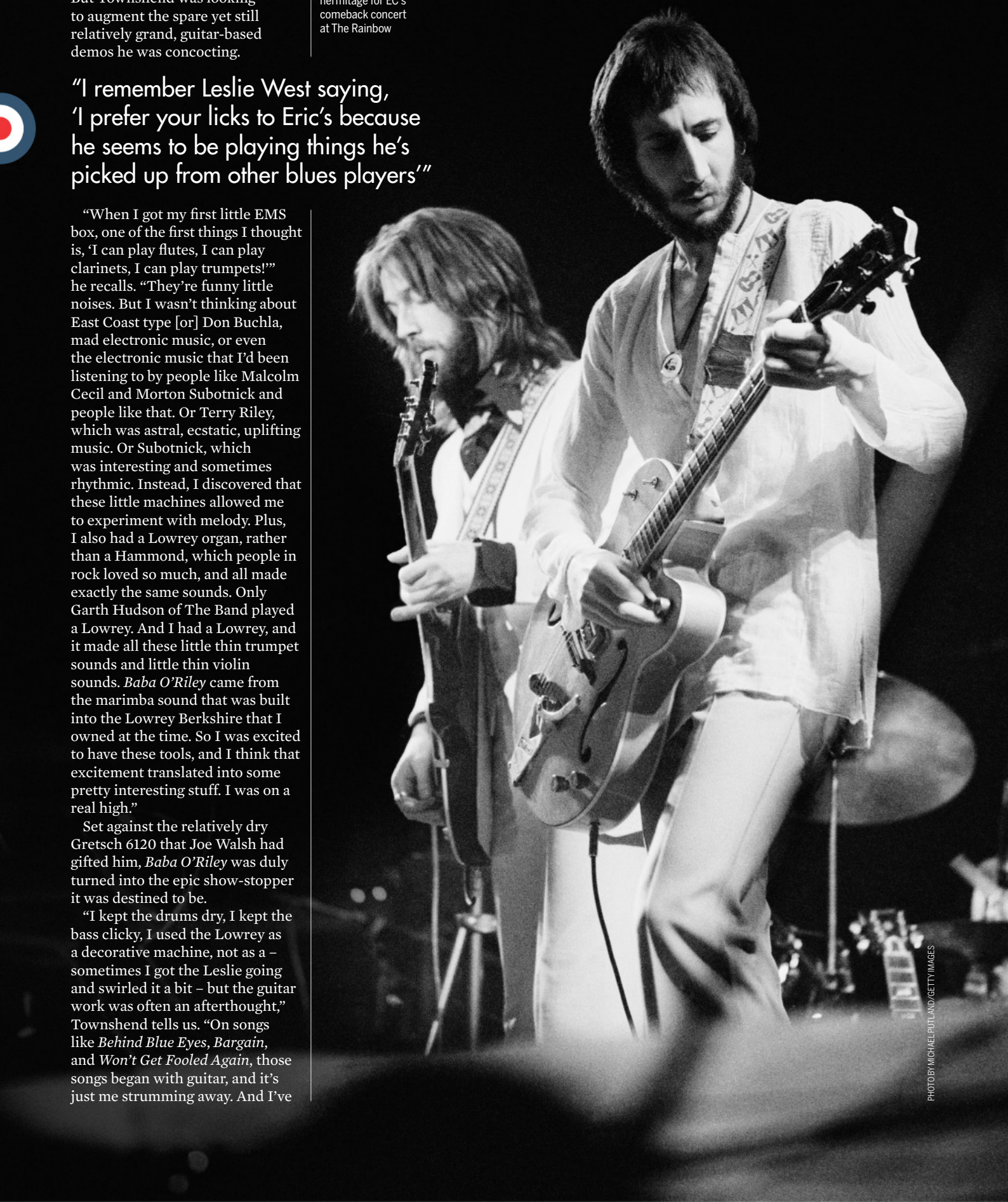


PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

"I remember Leslie West saying, 'I prefer your licks to Eric's because he seems to be playing things he's picked up from other blues players'"

"When I got my first little EMS box, one of the first things I thought is, 'I can play flutes, I can play clarinets, I can play trumpets!'" he recalls. "They're funny little noises. But I wasn't thinking about East Coast type [or] Don Buchla, mad electronic music, or even the electronic music that I'd been listening to by people like Malcolm Cecil and Morton Subotnick and people like that. Or Terry Riley, which was astral, ecstatic, uplifting music. Or Subotnick, which was interesting and sometimes rhythmic. Instead, I discovered that these little machines allowed me to experiment with melody. Plus, I also had a Lowrey organ, rather than a Hammond, which people in rock loved so much, and all made exactly the same sounds. Only Garth Hudson of The Band played a Lowrey. And I had a Lowrey, and it made all these little thin trumpet sounds and little thin violin sounds. *Baba O'Riley* came from the marimba sound that was built into the Lowrey Berkshire that I owned at the time. So I was excited to have these tools, and I think that excitement translated into some pretty interesting stuff. I was on a real high."

Set against the relatively dry Gretsch 6120 that Joe Walsh had gifted him, *Baba O'Riley* was duly turned into the epic show-stopper it was destined to be.

"I kept the drums dry, I kept the bass clicky, I used the Lowrey as a decorative machine, not as a – sometimes I got the Leslie going and swirled it a bit – but the guitar work was often an afterthought," Townshend tells us. "On songs like *Behind Blue Eyes*, *Bargain*, and *Won't Get Fooled Again*, those songs began with guitar, and it's just me strumming away. And I've

always been really good at that. I don't think I was any better or worse at that than I'd been on *Pinball Wizard*. My acoustic work – I've had all of the great guitarists in the world, all of the great virtuosos in the world say to me, 'Pete, you're not in the Top 10 for virtuosity, but you're certainly No 1 as an acoustic rhythm player.' So, in a sense, that's something that just happened to me because I was in a band with Keith Moon. I just had to hold it down. I had to be a metronomic, clear-cut, rhythmic player."

PHOTO BY CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

8. The Who in action at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970

Lifelong Love

Today, Townshend says he's still enamored with the guitar, and points around the room at some of the instruments he's been playing lately.

"I've got a Collings mandolin," he says, gesturing. "I've got a Fylde Ariel, an old Jazzmaster from 1958, one of the first, a brand-new short-scale Jaguar bass from Fender, which is incredibly good, a Guild 12-string, which is extraordinary and stays in tune over time, and I've got a J-200. And that will do me for here, this little studio that I have in France that I visit occasionally. I feel incredibly spoiled."

So how has Townshend's relationship with the guitar as a creative tool changed over time? And does he still have a sense of possibility in the instrument?

"Definitely!" he replies, emphatically. "What I'm happy about is that I can do two days of practice and learn some really flashy runs if I want to, though I'm still stuck with the old order, which is trying to make sure that I don't let my fingers play a series of clichés. I remember Leslie West saying to me about Eric Clapton: 'I prefer your licks, Pete, to Eric's, because Eric seems to be playing things that he's learned, that he's picked up from other blues players.' And I think that is a fair comparison, although I have seen Eric play live, where he really goes sky high. I think one of the things that all guitar players of today are intimidated by is these young guys on Instagram that shred to hell and back, or to heaven and back, I should say, who started when they were six. But we are just our fingers. So The Who have just done a tour of the UK, and I don't expect people to go on YouTube and get their minds blown, but I do think that some of the playing, some of the solos, some of the chordwork, some of the surprises, some of the avoiding tricks and being willing to take risks is really what I still feel the guitar is great for."

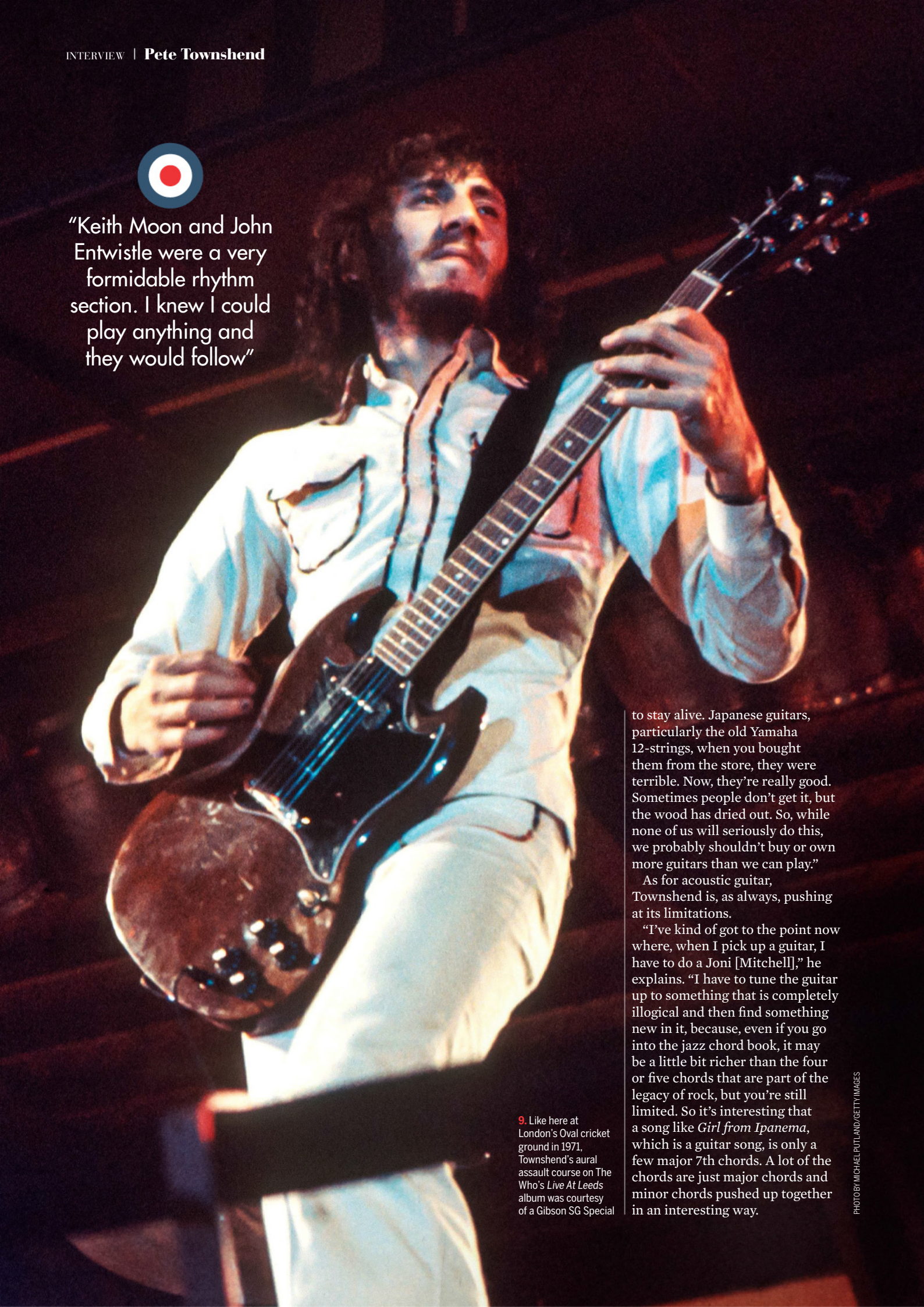
> "Some of the surprises, some of the avoiding tricks and being willing to take risks is really what I still feel the guitar is great for"

Of course, most people know Townshend as a songwriter, or perhaps as the flamboyant, high-jumping, guitar-smashing showman of The Who's heyday. But while he's no virtuoso, Townshend is a peerless rhythm player who's made an indelible mark on guitarists of all stripes over the past 60 years. So, what's his latest guitar discovery?

"The other day, I thought, 'It's time for me to try a Charvel, or one of these sort of heavy metal guitars,'" he confesses. "I've stuck with Eric Clapton-style Strats for such a long time now, though I do pick up Les Pauls and SGs and I love them, but they don't allow me enough scope and change on stage. So I've always thought, 'If I buy a Charvel or a PRS or any of those super-fast new jazz guitars, I'm going to have one sound and it's going to be finger memory.' But the other day, I thought, 'Fuck it. I'll try one out.' I bought a Jackson. I didn't know that they were owned by Charvel and that Charvel are now owned by Fender, but I bought a Jackson. I got it out of the box and it's got very light strings on and a notch where the strings are locked down, and it's got the strings locked at the other end, too, and you tune them with little buttons. And so, the whammy bar is extraordinary! I was playing faster. No question. I was playing at three times the speed that I normally play at. And when I did fingering, drumming, it didn't stop. It didn't go *thunk*; it went *ding*. Because these guitars are built for a particular kind of thing. So I'm still learning and I'm still having fun with guitars."

And does he still collect?

"I had [guitar tech] Alan Rogan in my life for so long, and whenever we finished a tour, he would always buy me a guitar," Townshend recalls. "And, of course, he bought me and gave me some fantastic guitars. I've never been really that interested in owning a '57 Les Paul or anything. I picked up a few in my life and thought, 'What's the story here?' Because what's important about guitars is that they need to be played, and I think, unfortunately, it's difficult to play them all properly. They need to be played



"Keith Moon and John Entwistle were a very formidable rhythm section. I knew I could play anything and they would follow"

to stay alive. Japanese guitars, particularly the old Yamaha 12-strings, when you bought them from the store, they were terrible. Now, they're really good. Sometimes people don't get it, but the wood has dried out. So, while none of us will seriously do this, we probably shouldn't buy or own more guitars than we can play."

As for acoustic guitar, Townshend is, as always, pushing at its limitations.

"I've kind of got to the point now where, when I pick up a guitar, I have to do a Joni [Mitchell]," he explains. "I have to tune the guitar up to something that is completely illogical and then find something new in it, because, even if you go into the jazz chord book, it may be a little bit richer than the four or five chords that are part of the legacy of rock, but you're still limited. So it's interesting that a song like *Girl from Ipanema*, which is a guitar song, is only a few major 7th chords. A lot of the chords are just major chords and minor chords pushed up together in an interesting way.

9. Like here at London's Oval cricket ground in 1971, Townshend's aural assault course on The Who's *Live At Leeds* album was courtesy of a Gibson SG Special

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

"So the discovery in the work with guitar can be about chords, it can be about composition, it can be about harmony, it can be about shredding. But the thing about shredding is that thing about letting your fingers do the work. It's difficult when you've watched, for example, some of the great shredders performing live, and they look disconnected. You think, 'Are they really playing this or are their fingers playing it?' In a way, if their fingers are playing it, that's okay because then what they're doing is they're listening. They're not playing, they're listening, and that creates another sort of interesting fact about what's called 'found music', when we sample and we listen to music and we're inspired by it because we're listening.

"Keith Moon was a nutty drummer, but he listened. John Entwistle, too. So they were a very formidable rhythm section. And I knew I could play anything and they would follow. John Entwistle would know the notes that I was playing sometimes before I did! So the importance of *listening* is vital."

So, does Townshend think that, since those speed players are less listening, more performing, that's why there's less of a lyrical nature to that speed playing? Or is it the nature of the beast, that if you're playing that fast, it's hard to be melodic and lyrical?

"Well, Prince could shred and he often would play a really soulful blues track, and then in order to get from one bit of blues to the other, he would do an extraordinary shred," Towshend counters, emphatically. "So it was a bit flashy [vocalising]. Maybe it was just to show he could do it. So, I don't know. I think it's just the disconnect that has happened sometimes. And where you see it stop is when that kind of artist, and there are many on Instagram – one of my favorites is a guy called Angel Vivaldi, who's a brilliant, brilliant player – but when he works with other musicians, he changes. He actually listens to them and fits in. He can play anything that he wants to play. And there are a couple of others that I follow as well, but a lot of them are just solo musicians that have mastered their craft and got really, really fast.

10

PHOTO BY JAY DICKMAN/CORBIS/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

10. Lately Pete has shunned Fender Strats and Teles in favour of more contemporary brands like Jackson

11. Still rocking hard on stage with Who bandmate Roger Daltrey in Barcelona, June 2023

> "When I pick up a guitar now, I have to do a Joni. I have to tune up to something completely illogical and then find something new in it"

"So, I think what needs to happen is they need to be fitted into the music world, somewhere other than Instagram. That's the challenge for them. I think it's the challenge right now, as it is for a lot of electronic music musicians: they are very isolated, working on their own."

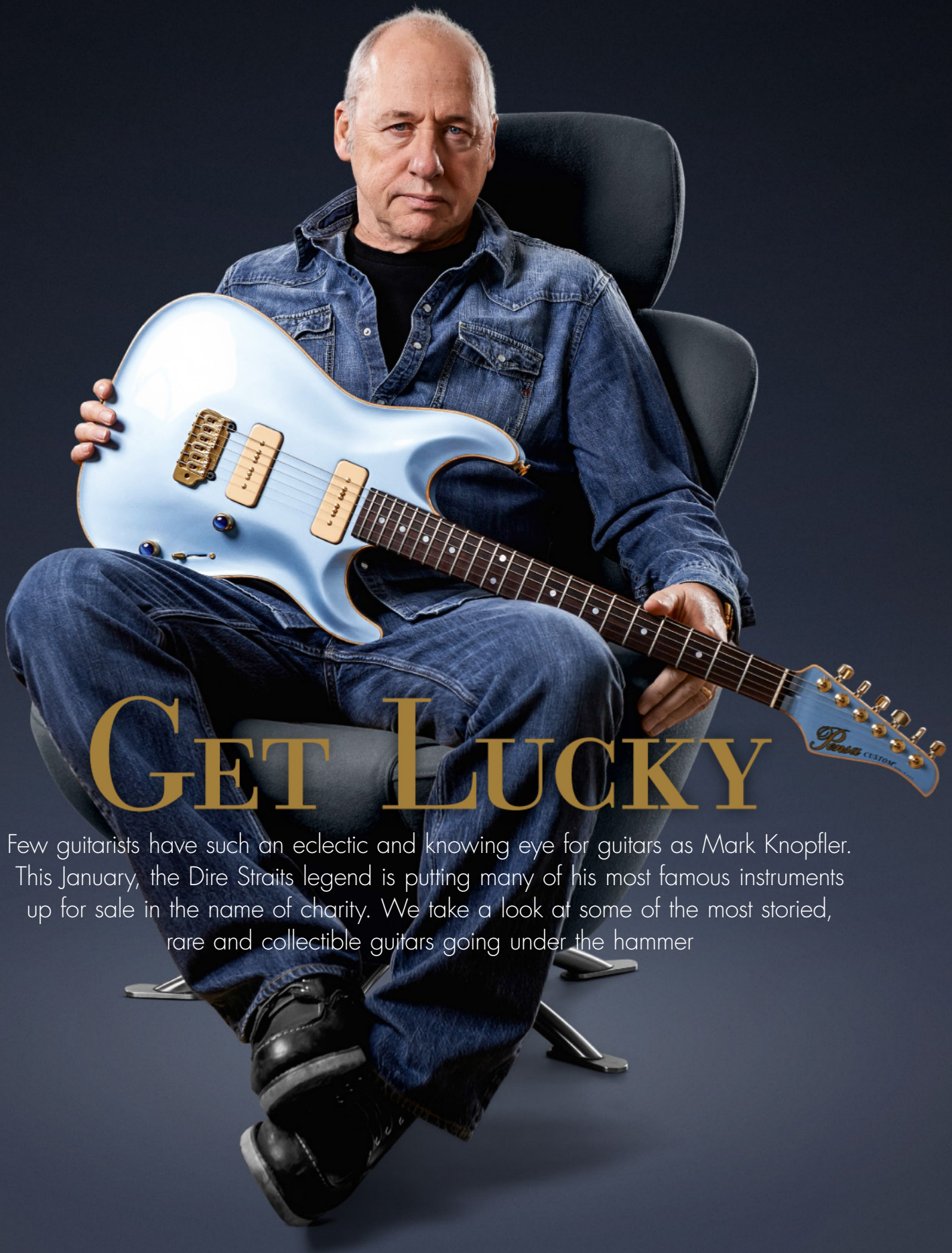
As we wind up our hours-long chat about all things The Who, *Lifehouse*, expanding guitar music by way of synthesizers, and the guitar itself, *Guitarist* asks Townshend to reflect on his 60-year love affair with the instrument that made him a household name.

"I swing my arm 15 times, I have an adrenaline rush, and I just let my fingers fly," he says of his approach, even to this day. "But I go back to *Live At Leeds* and I'm all over the place. I watch my hands and go, 'Fucking hell.' Because most of it is bum notes, but it's also incredibly powerful stuff. So I'm enjoying learning to both appreciate and play the guitar, still, to this day. Because you never stop learning. So, yes, I still love the instrument and, yes, I still have hundreds. I mean, literally!"

11

PHOTO BY XAVI TORRENT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

The multi-format Super Deluxe edition of *Who's Next | Life House* is available now on UMR ***www.thewho.com***



Get Lucky

Few guitarists have such an eclectic and knowing eye for guitars as Mark Knopfler. This January, the Dire Straits legend is putting many of his most famous instruments up for sale in the name of charity. We take a look at some of the most storied, rare and collectible guitars going under the hammer

Words Jamie Dickson **Portrait** Joby Sessions

PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

Main image (far left): Mark Knopfler pictured in 2018 with his 2011 'Blue' Pensa Custom

Left: The Pensa MK-90 Custom, available in Christie's auction, is a very close cousin

PHOTO BY LARRY HULST/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

The 'Money For Nothing' Gibson Les Paul Standard '59 Reissue

Purchased in 1984 from Rudy Pensa, in the early days of Dire Straits, this relatively early reissue Les Paul Standard was used during recording of the 1985 Dire Straits' album *Brothers In Arms* for the title track and *Money For Nothing*. Mark also played it on stage at Live Aid in 1985 when Dire Straits played *Money For Nothing* with Sting on vocals.

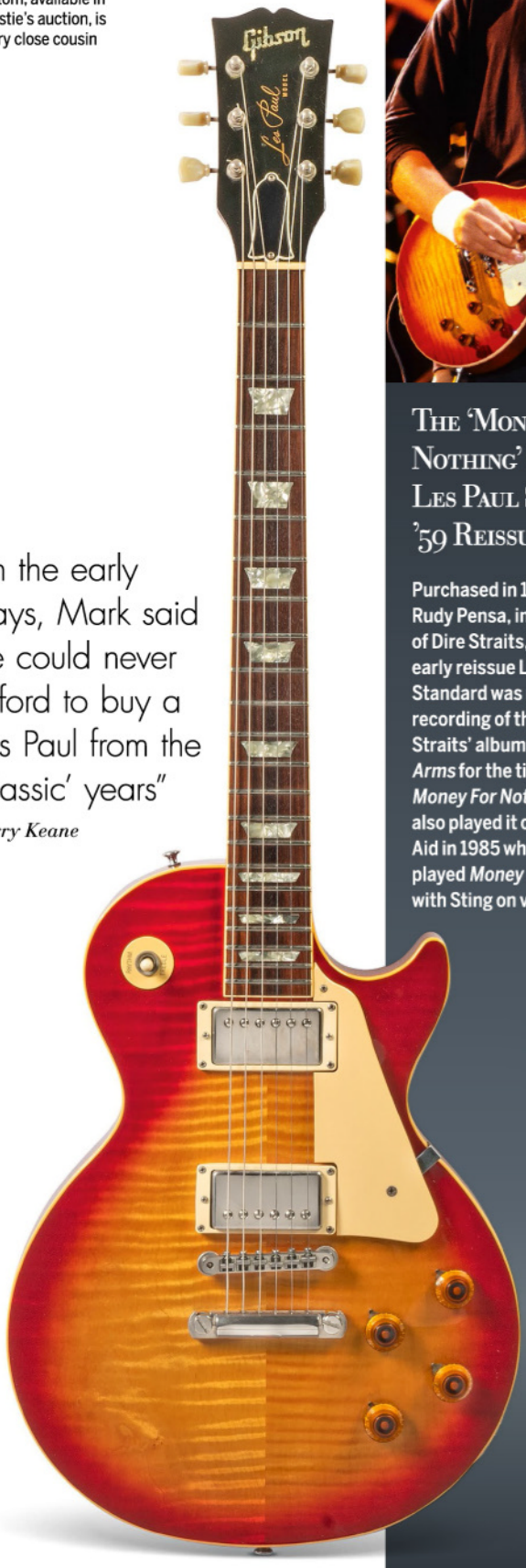


PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

Some guitarists, such as Brian May, are forever associated with a single guitar. Others, such as Mark Knopfler, have browsed through a century and more of the luthier's craft to track down unique sounds. During the course of his 50-year career, Mark has used everything from Les Paul reissues to jazz-era D'Angelico archtops to create ageless tracks such as *Money For Nothing* and *Brothers In Arms*, and Mark's thick catalogue of solo albums such as *Tracker*, *Get Lucky*, *Down The Road Wherever* and more. In the process, he built up one of the most enviable collections of recording instruments you'll find.

So it's all the more remarkable that he's now putting 120 of these guitars and amps, including those used on some of his most famous work, up for auction at Christie's in London on 31 January. We catch up with Kerry Keane, Christie's vintage guitar expert – who also inspected and prepared David Gilmour's guitars for sale in 2019 – to talk about some of the highlights of the upcoming sale.

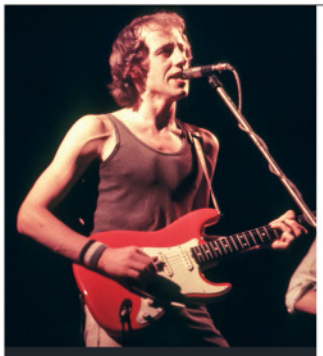
> "In the early days, Mark said he could never afford to buy a Les Paul from the 'classic' years"
> *Kerry Keane*

What does this sale represent in terms of Mark Knopfler's relationship with the guitar?

"I'm a bit of a guitar nerd and I find guitars wonderful to look at as icons of the stylistic time period they were made in. But at the same time, they are static items until they're put into the lap of an artist, a guitarist, and then they fully fulfil their mission. There are 123 lots in this sale and the vast majority of them are guitars. And, for me, they illustrate the musical journey of one of popular music's greatest artists, from his youngest influences as a guitarist to a performer and now a composer today."

There's a wide range of guitars in the sale, but some, like the 1988 Pensa-Suhr custom, are indelibly associated with Mark's time in Dire Straits.

"Yeah, I think without a doubt, that's a very iconic



Mark Knopfler Signature Stratocaster Prototype

No auction of Knopfler gear would be complete without a red Strat and, in fact, Christie's will be presenting for sale the only prototype for the Mark Knopfler Signature Stratocaster, shown here. It was used for various one-off shows in 2009 as promo for the album *Get Lucky*, including *An Evening With Mark Knopfler* at London's Hurlingham Club on 9 September 2009 in aid of the Prince's Trust, where he played *Sailing To Philadelphia*, *Sultans Of Swing*, *Why Worry* and *Going Home* on the prototype. It was also used on the 2013 Privateering Tour for performances of *5.15am* and *I Used To Could*.

PHOTO BY ROB VERHORST/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Right: The sale includes a fair few oddball and retro guitars such as Teiscos and this Danelectro Silvertone used on 2004's *Shangri-La* LP

PHOTO BY KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES

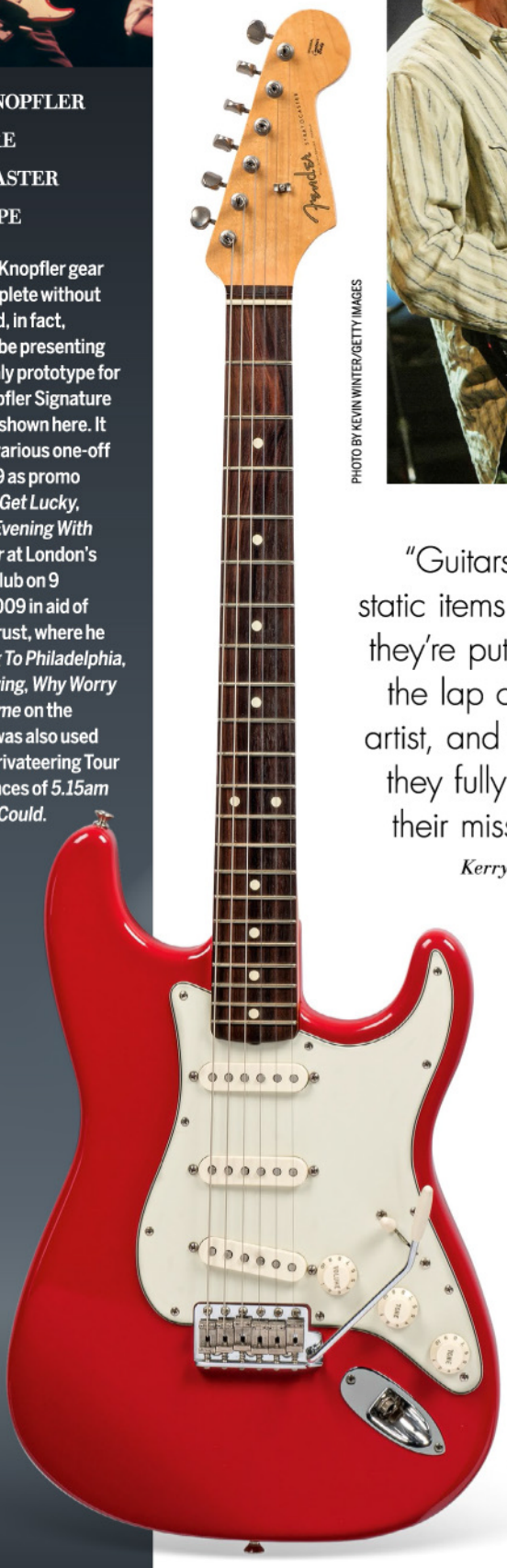


PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

> "Guitars are static items until they're put into the lap of an artist, and then they fully fulfil their mission"
>
> *Kerry Keane*

guitar in terms of his performances. Firstly, just as an object it's a spectacular example of really great guitar making and it really illustrates, I think, the high skill that John Suhr brings to the craft. John shared with me a really wonderful backstory about Mark meeting with Rudy Pensa. And after having done quite a bit of business with him over the years, Mark came up with the idea of 'let's design the perfect guitar for me'. And that was all drawn out on a napkin in Fritzel's Coffee Shoppe in midtown Manhattan.

"What I did not know was that John Suhr, a talented young guitar maker, had begun making an instrument specifically for himself – and had decided to pull out all the stops, using the finest pieces of wood [at his disposal]. He had it roughed out and he'd decided to arch the top, which he'd never done before [on a guitar of this type], arching it in the same way that a Gibson Les Paul top is arched, unlike the flat slab of a Telecaster or the contours of a Stratocaster. He wanted to do a sort of violin arch. And that part of the work was done when in comes Rudy Pensa, and says, 'I think this is going to be the perfect guitar for Mark after speaking with him.'

"So John had to take this half-finished instrument and now fit it to the needs of Mark Knopfler. There was a time period in which it had to be done, in order to be delivered to Mark in time for his performance in a Nelson Mandela tribute, which I believe was in 1988. And to this day, John Suhr says firstly that he thinks that guitar is one of the finest pieces of work he's ever done, but also that it was his crowning achievement as a guitar maker to finish that instrument to fit the needs of Mark Knopfler and to fulfil the quality and get it there on time. He was worried about the nitrocellulose lacquer drying in time [for delivery]. He had all the coats on and then decided to do a final top coat with polyester. Which

Knopfler's 1958 ES-335 in natural finish represents a veritable 'Holy Grail' instrument for fans of semi-hollow Gibsons

Numerous Les Paul Juniors are in the auction, reflecting Knopfler's love of this simple but enduringly effective workhorse, including this exemplary 1958 model

PHOTOS: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

was sort of a new development in '88, as not a lot of independent makers were using a polyester topcoat at that time. But it worked and he was able to say, 'Good, it'll hold, now we can get it off to Mark.'"

Tell us about some of the notable Les Pauls in the sale. There's one original 1959 Les Paul Standard and then some reissues, one of which had a very special role in Mark's recording career.

"Yes. There's only one vintage 'Burst in the sale, but there are a couple of more modern reissue sunbursts. In the early days of Dire Straits, Mark said he could never afford to buy a Les Paul from the 'classic' years, so he got a reissue and recorded things like *Brothers In Arms* and *Money For Nothing* with that one, and toured with it. That particular guitar was purchased in 1984 from Rudy Pensa and it was used during recording of the 1985 Dire Straits album, *Brothers In Arms*, for the title track and *Money For Nothing*.

"But by the mid-90s, Mark was able to afford the real deal. He actually said, during an interview, 'Success I adore. It means I can buy 1959 Gibson Les Pauls and Triumph motorcycles. But I detest fame. It interferes with what you do and has no redeeming features at all.' So Mark purchased the 1959 Les Paul from Bobby Tench, previously of the Jeff Beck Group, via Pete Townshend's guitar tech, Alan Rogan, and he also purchased a 1958 [at the time], which he is retaining."

No discussion of Mark's music would be complete without talking about his work on acoustic guitars. There are some extraordinary acoustics in the sale, such as the 1951 Martin D-28.

"Well, that guitar comes a little bit later in his career. I mean, I don't think he had that guitar until about 2000 or so. And he shared with us that he couldn't afford a [classic] Martin in the beginning [of his career]. He bought this particular one in 2017

"These guitars illustrate the musical journey of one of popular music's greatest artists"

Kerry Keane

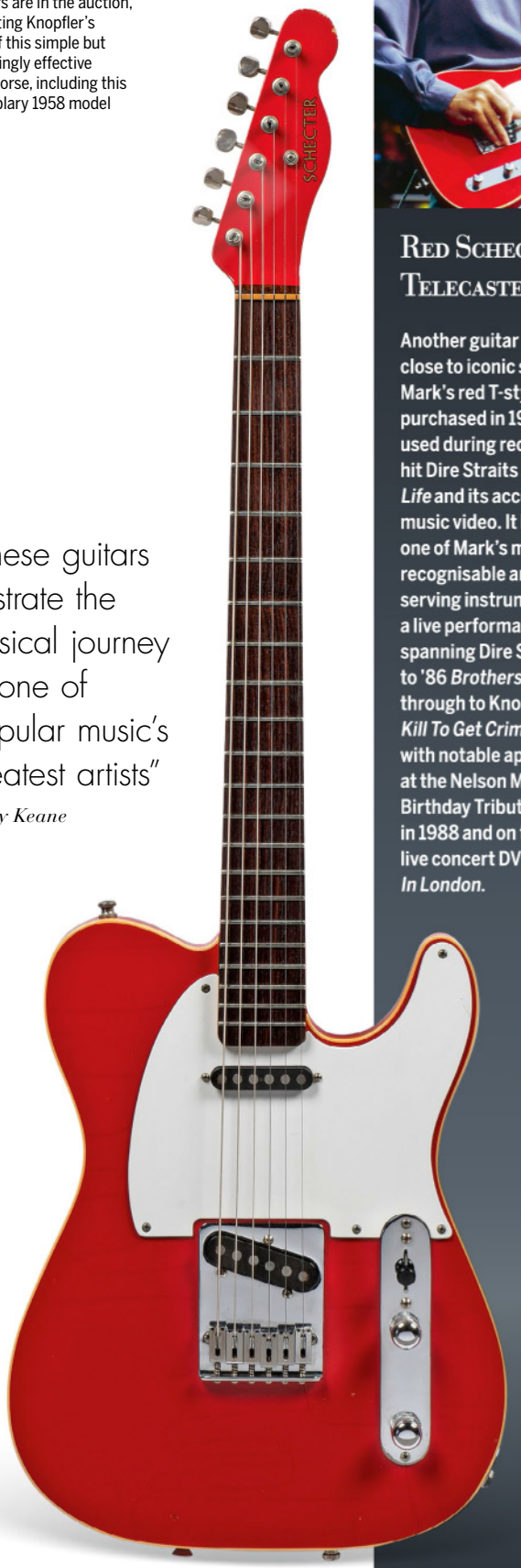


PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

PHOTO BY PHIL DENT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Red Schecter Telecaster

Another guitar that comes close to iconic status is Mark's red T-style Schecter, purchased in 1984 and first used during recording of the hit Dire Straits song *Walk Of Life* and its accompanying music video. It became one of Mark's most recognisable and longest-serving instruments, with a live performance history spanning Dire Straits' 1985 to '86 *Brothers In Arms Tour* through to Knopfler's 2008 *Kill To Get Crimson Tour*, with notable appearances at the Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute Concert in 1988 and on the 1996 live concert DVD *A Night In London*.

Martin Acoustic 000-40S MK Signature Model 'Ragpickers Dream'

A numbered limited edition of 155 of these signature model Martins were made in 2006 and the guitar is signed on the internal label by both Mark Knopfler and Martin chairman, CF Martin – and this particular example is #2. Mark's signature is also inlaid in mother-of-pearl between the 18th and 20th frets. The guitar was named after Mark's 2002 solo album, *The Ragpicker's Dream*. He toured extensively with this guitar and it has featured in most of his live acoustic performances since 2006, predominantly for the songs *Marbletown*, *Privateering* and *Monteleone*, including at The Fox Theater on 28 October 2013 in Oakland, California, to promote the release of his solo album *Privateering*.

PHOTO BY TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

While pre-war Martins remain the most revered, post-war dreadnoughts such as Knopfler's 1951 D-28, also in the auction, can be every bit as good

PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

"Prior to getting the D-28, Mark was mostly playing slope-shouldered Gibson Dreadnoughts"

Kerry Keane

PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

from the Vintage Guitar Emporium in London and immediately put it to use in the studio to record *Nobody's Child* and *Pale Imitation* along with a few others. He waxes endlessly about acoustic guitars, but it's interesting that prior to getting the D-28, he was mostly playing slope-shouldered Gibson Dreadnoughts – and you'll see quite a few of them in the sale. But his Martins tended to be smaller-bodied instruments.

"Two of which that excited me, in the sale, were firstly a 1917 00-30 – very, very early – and then he had done a signature model but not with Martin, but then he went back and did another signature model [this time with Martin] and that is the 000-40S, known as the 'Ragpickers Dream'. But what a great instrument and, again, it kind of illustrates, for me, his expertise as a fingerpicker."

People always speak reverently about pre-war Martin Dreadnoughts, but how much difference is there between them and the Martin Dreads in the 1950s, quality-wise?

"You know, I'm gonna get in a lot of trouble for saying this... pre-war Martins are spectacular. But I think we, as musicians, and as connoisseurs of great guitar making and the tonal qualities of guitars, we should never diminish the quality of guitars that Martin was making after World War II. I had a client a few years back who purchased a 1954 D-28 that was in spectacular condition and sounded magnificent. And I remember one of the sort of better connoisseurs in the guitar world playing that guitar. He said, 'Oh my God, this is the real thing.' So, yeah, I think we put maybe too much emphasis on the pre-war instruments, but that's the market speaking. And the market always goes where it wishes." G

The Mark Knopfler Guitar Collection auction opens on 31 January 2024 at Christie's in London ***www.christies.com***

PHOTO BY PHILIPPE RENAULT/GAMMA-RAPHO/GETTY IMAGES

Pensa-Suhr MK1

Described earlier in this article, the 1988 Pensa-Suhr MK1 was imagined as a crossover between a Stratocaster and a Les Paul in order to cut down on guitar changes during sets. The finished guitar was completed in record time so it would be ready for Mark to play with Dire Straits at the Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute concert on 11 June 1988 at Wembley Stadium (with Eric Clapton as second guitarist!), making its debut a week earlier when Knopfler played *Money For Nothing* and *Layla* with Eric Clapton's All-Star Band at the Prince's Trust Rock Gala on 6 June 1988. It became a favourite studio and performance guitar for the next five years, used extensively during recording of the 1991 Dire Straits album, *On Every Street*, and throughout the 1991 and '92 *On Every Street Tour*.

PHOTO BY AMANDA EDWARDS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

1959 Gibson Les Paul Standard

Purchased from Bobby Tench, previously of the Jeff Beck Group, via Pete Townshend's guitar tech, Alan Rogan, this original '59 'Burst was used for performances of *Brothers In Arms* and *Pyroman* on the 2001 *Sailing To Philadelphia* tour, and for *Wye Aye Man* on the 2008 *Kill To Get Crimson Tour*. It was also used to record *Cleaning My Gun* on 2009's *Get Lucky* album.

PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

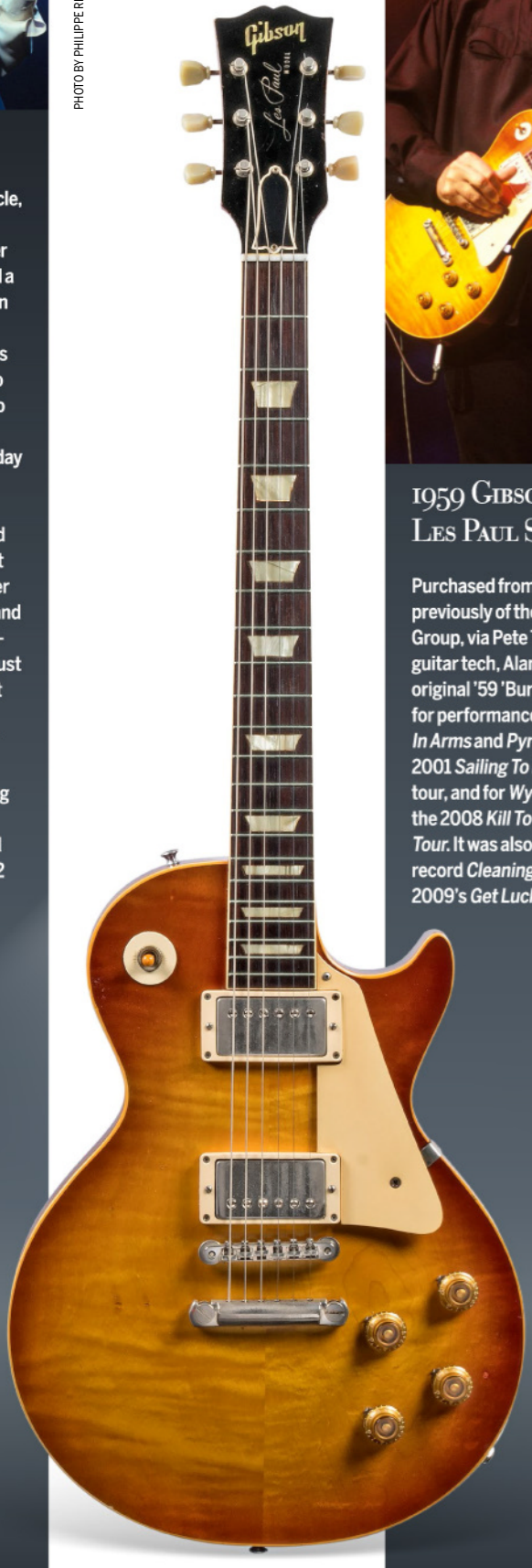


PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2023

PIONEERS

Joe Pass

Consummate soloist, impeccable accompanist, tireless educator, fearless improvisor and bona-fide jazz legend, Joe Pass was a man that had it all – and then some! And as one of the most fluid and fluent of the great jazz guitarists, his infectious and effortlessly melodic playing is as joyous as it is mindblowing

Words Denny Ilett

Joe Pass was born Joseph Anthony Jacobi Passalacqua to Sicilian immigrants in New Jersey on 13 January 1929. He acquired his first guitar at the age of nine after being captivated by country legend Gene Autry's appearance in the 1940 movie *Ride, Tenderfoot, Ride*. It wasn't long before Joe's interest became an obsession and he would practise for two hours before school and two hours after, and then continue for four more hours after dinner before he went to bed.

His father drove him relentlessly and would ask his young son to work out – on the spot – any tune that happened to be on the radio. He also encouraged him to embellish melodies as he heard them. At that time Joe didn't know what improvising was. To him it was "filling up the spaces".

By the age of 14, Joe was out gigging at parties and dances. His father, a steel worker, was astonished that his son could earn more than he could: $5 per night. It was around this time that Joe developed an interest in jazz. His primary influence was Django Reinhardt, whose records were now starting to appear in the United States, inspiring and frightening guitarists in equal measure. Joe further expanded his jazz education when he discovered the electric guitar pioneer Charlie Christian through his recordings with the 'King of Swing' Benny Goodman. From there, Joe took influence from a number of burgeoning young jazz guitarists of the 1940s such as Barney Kessel, Tal Farlow and Jimmy Raney. As Joe said: "These guys added another dimension to the instrument."

Time With Montgomery

Later on, Joe took to the playing of Wes Montgomery. Little did he know that some years later the admiration would be reciprocated. So it was that in 1968, when Montgomery was at the peak of his popularity, he appeared on television's *The Woody Woodbury Show*. When the host asked the spotlighted player who his favourite guitarist was, Montgomery pointed at the house band, declaring: "He's sitting right there in your band!" The band's guitarist was Joe Pass.

In the mid-1940s, and still a teenager, Joe was sent to New York to study with the guitar legend Harry Volpe. After discovering that Joe was the better improvisor, Volpe switched to teaching Joe sight-reading, which didn't interest the student at all. He left for home, but the buzz of New York City had left its mark on the young jazzer and he so soon moved back to the city. Pass was now spending his time taking in as much of the great jazz scene that NYC had to offer, soaking up the music of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Tatum and other jazz mavericks of the era. But it was also at this time that he picked up a drug habit, something that was to plague his life for the next 15 years.

Joe spent these years hopping from town to town, weaving in and out of prison and rehab. He played bebop for strippers in New Orleans, often staying up for days on end and constantly pawning his guitar. He also spent time in Las Vegas picking up any gig he could. He summed up these years by confessing "staying high was my first priority".

In 1954, Joe was arrested and sent to the Public Health Service Hospital in Fort

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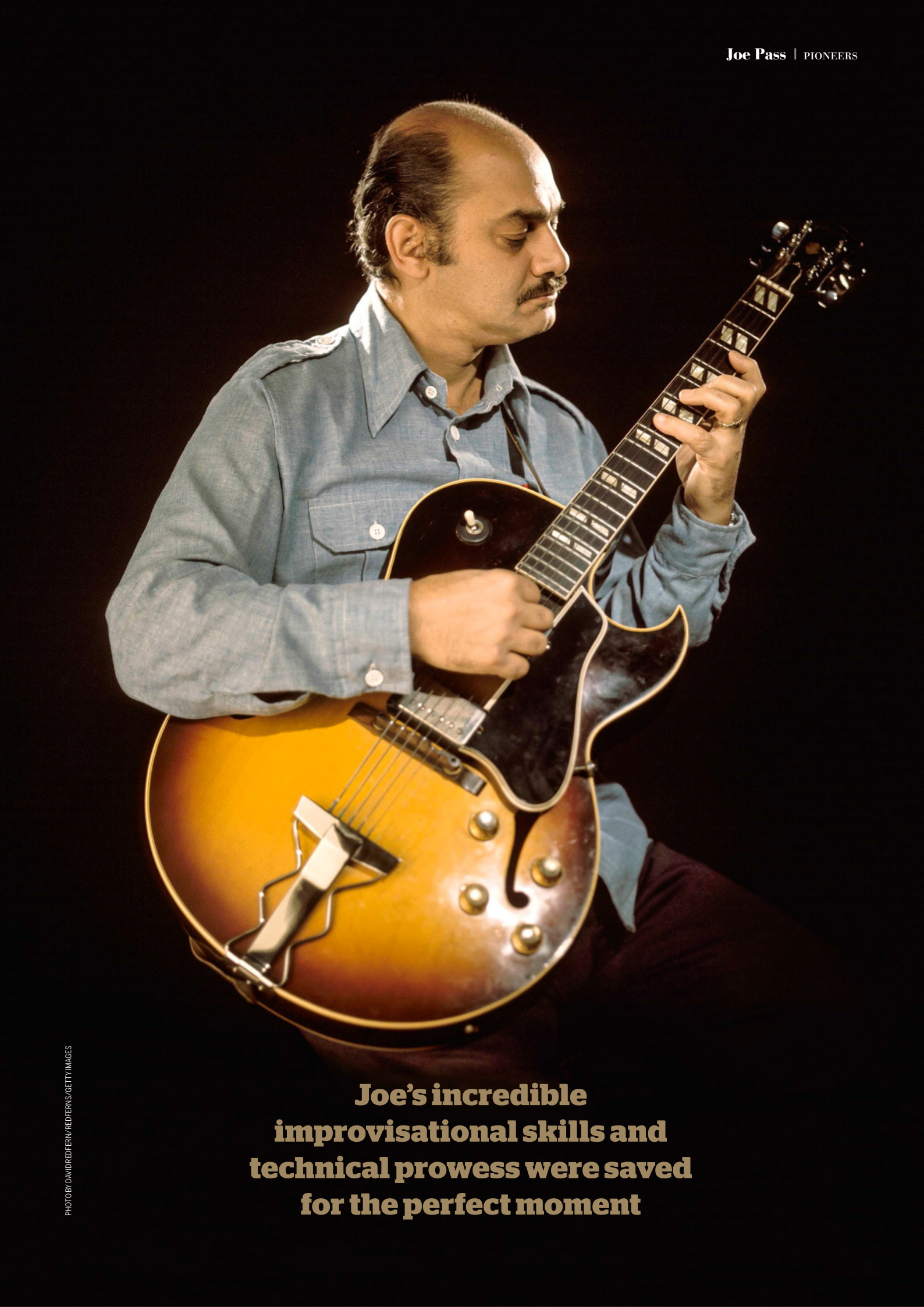

PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Joe's incredible improvisational skills and technical prowess were saved for the perfect moment

PHOTO BY © JOSEPH SCHWARTZ / CORBIS / CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

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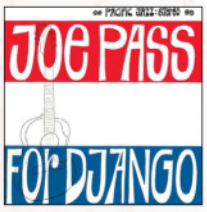
Having endured a turbulent time in his 20s with prison and drugs, Joe found focus in his early 30s with the release of his debut album, *Sounds Of Synanon*

Worth, Texas, where he served four years. Following his release, in 1960 he entered Synanon, a rehabilitation centre based in Santa Monica, California, and it was there that he finally started to look at his life and career more seriously. Two years later he made his debut recording, *Sounds Of Synanon*, which also featured five other jazz musicians who were resident at the facility. The influential publication *DownBeat* stated the album "unveils a star in Joe Pass."



Joe was joined by guitarist John Pisano, bassist Jim Hughart and drummer Colin Bailey for 1964's *For Django*

Living A Full Life

Much of what Joe Pass is known for today is present on *Sounds Of Synanon* and other early recordings. Like his idol Wes Montgomery, Joe didn't record too young and was in his early 30s when he made his recording debut. This meant, after years of playing in clubs all over the US, Joe's blistering and impressively accurate technique was unleashed fully formed on the record-buying public.

Pass may well have been the first electric jazz guitarist to possess the technical facility to hold his own among the sax and piano players of the time, but it wasn't just about speed. His ideas were so melodic and well crafted; it was never just a series of fast scale-runs. He showed complete mastery of the bebop jazz language – a language invented on horns. And for anyone who's tried to play a Charlie Parker theme at speed on the guitar, they'll know it's not easy. Those lines don't sit under the fingers in the way a pentatonic scale does. Joe, however, found a way and it sounds so smooth and legato-like that it could almost be sax.

Top Three Album Picks

An essential listen has to be Joe's 1964 album *For Django*, featuring tunes written by or associated with Django Reinhardt. Although influenced by the Gypsy jazz legend, Joe made no attempt to emulate him, and this album is considered, in its own right, to be one of the greatest jazz guitar records ever made.

Another recommended album is *Virtuoso*, a solo record released in 1974. There were eventually four volumes made under the title – and they're all incredible – but there's something extra special about *Volume 1*.

Fitzgerald & Pass... Again from 1976, the second album Joe made in duet with Ella Fitzgerald, is a masterclass in understated accompaniment with Joe's fabulous and inventive guitar weaving in, out and around Ella's beautiful vocals.

Left: Joe with Ella Fitzgerald at the taping of the PBS live concert TV series *Soundstage*
Above: 1976's *Fitzgerald & Pass... Again* was the second of four albums the duo recorded for Norman Granz's Pablo label

The Guitars

Joe Pass played a Gibson ES-175 for most of his career, although two signature models carry his name. The Ibanez JP20, in production from 1980 until 1990, was loosely based on a D'Aquisto Excel that Joe also liked to play. However, Pass didn't prefer it to his beloved 175, saying: "They pay me to play it and I get a free replacement if it gets beaten up..."

The signature model most will know is the Epiphone Joe Pass Emperor, which was produced shortly before Joe's death in 1994. Although discontinued in 2015 it was for many years one of the best entry-level archtops money could buy.

PHOTO BY STEVE CATLIN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Joe Pass's work with Ella Fitzgerald revealed another side to his musicianship, a sensitive, complementary accompaniment to Ella's sublime vocals

The legend was that Joe didn't own an electric guitar at this time, and he used a loaned Fender Jaguar for his early life outside rehab. Shortly after, as work became more stable, he acquired the guitar that he'll be forever associated with, the Gibson ES-175. Plenty of jazz guitarists used the 175 as their go-to instrument and still do. With a slightly smaller body than the Gibson L5 (Montgomery's choice), the 175 also has a laminate top that tightens up the sound and makes the guitar less prone to feedback.

For the rest of the 1960s Joe spent most of his time working studio sessions and TV shows. This work was steady and well paid but anonymous. The busiest session players during those years were jazz musicians – because they were the ones that knew how to play anything that was thrown at them in the studio. To this day, most people are unaware that the biggest pop hits in America were recorded using jazz musicians. Joe was one of them, but he wasn't especially happy and, like many others, had quit the scene by the early 70s.

Elevated Jazz

In 1973 Pass met record producer Norman Granz who, with his organisation Jazz At The Philharmonic, had managed to elevate jazz from club to concert hall. On Granz's roster were the likes of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Oscar Peterson and Ella Fitzgerald. He paid his musicians well and had formed Pablo, a record label, to create hundreds of albums with stars such as Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong and Count Basie.

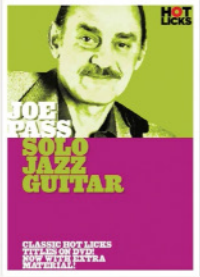
Joe signed with Granz's label in late 1973, and, shortly afterwards, released the groundbreaking and influential album *Virtuoso*. Comprising 11 jazz standards (and one off-the-cuff blues), it's an album that every guitarist needs to hear. Norman Granz put Joe, with no backing band, in a studio and set the tapes running. What comes out is something extraordinary and all of it is improvised. Most solo guitarists would have probably worked out a few routines, but not Joe. If he'd recorded all the tunes again the next day, then they would have sounded completely different.

1974's jazz masterclass *Virtuoso* comprised mostly covers with one original Joe Pass composition, *Blues For Alican*

Each tune was taken apart and reassembled on the spot. Joe embellished the melodies with a heady combination of fret-melting single-note runs and block-chording, all delivered with such skill and playful abandon that surely Django Reinhardt himself would smile in appreciation. It was the album that truly put Joe on the musical map and remains one of Pablo's best-selling releases.

Three further volumes of *Virtuoso* were recorded. Granz then teamed Joe with piano giant Oscar Peterson and Danish bassist Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen for the album *The Trio*, which went on to win a Grammy. The three musicians became a regular touring group throughout the 70s and 80s, taking Joe all over the world.

Joe also collaborated with Ella Fitzgerald, and the pair recorded four studio albums together between 1973 and 1986, as well as several live releases. This revealed another side to Joe's musicianship, demonstrating a sensitive and complementary accompaniment to Ella's sublime vocals. Ella and Joe enjoyed a deep connection and friendship that shone through on everything they played together.



Hot Licks' Joe Pass instructional (online) videos and books are available at www.halleonard.com

An Education

Joe produced several instructional books throughout the 1980s. These manuals, which are still in print, each focus on a different aspect of his impressive range of skills; it's rare to find a jazz guitarist who hasn't tried to absorb some of Joe's genius by poring through the volumes. Later, Hot Licks produced two instructional videos featuring Joe: *Solo Jazz Guitar* and *The Blue Side Of Jazz*. These are still available and are full of tips from the master, all delivered with his charming humour and dry wit.

In the early 90s Joe's health started to decline, and in 1992 he was diagnosed with liver cancer. He continued to play and record up until 16 days before his death on 23 May 1994, at the age of 65. His last recording was a collection of Hank Williams songs, with guitarist and vocalist Roy Clark. In total, Pass appeared on more than 70 albums as either leader or sideman.

He showed complete mastery of the bebop jazz language – a language invented on horns

PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

From left to right: Joe Pass, Oscar Peterson and Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen perform on stage in the 70s

So much of Joe's later career was dedicated to teaching. He toured college campuses and held masterclasses and workshops all over the world. His entire philosophy was to make jazz guitar simple and accessible. It was something he succeeded in doing. In one of his masterclass videos Joe is asked about his choice of chord shapes. A smile appears as he explains he doesn't go for long finger stretches or too much in the way of harmonic extensions. "I like the simple shapes, the 'grips' I call them. If it's hard, I don't do it!"

Many guitar players will perceive Joe's music as far from simple yet it does have a simplicity to it. One that gets straight to the point, straight to the heart of a song. Joe had that rare ability to play exactly what was right in any given moment. Yes, there are, at times, a lot of notes, but they were never gratuitous. He wasn't interested in impressing other guitar players, although he most certainly did.

Joe's drive was to serve the music first and foremost. His incredible improvisational skills and technical prowess were saved for the perfect moment. It might be a cliché to say 'they told a story' when describing how certain legendary musicians play, but this is an accurate way to assess Joe's approach. Some people operate the guitar, but Joe Pass really *played* it. G

Guitarist PRESENTS

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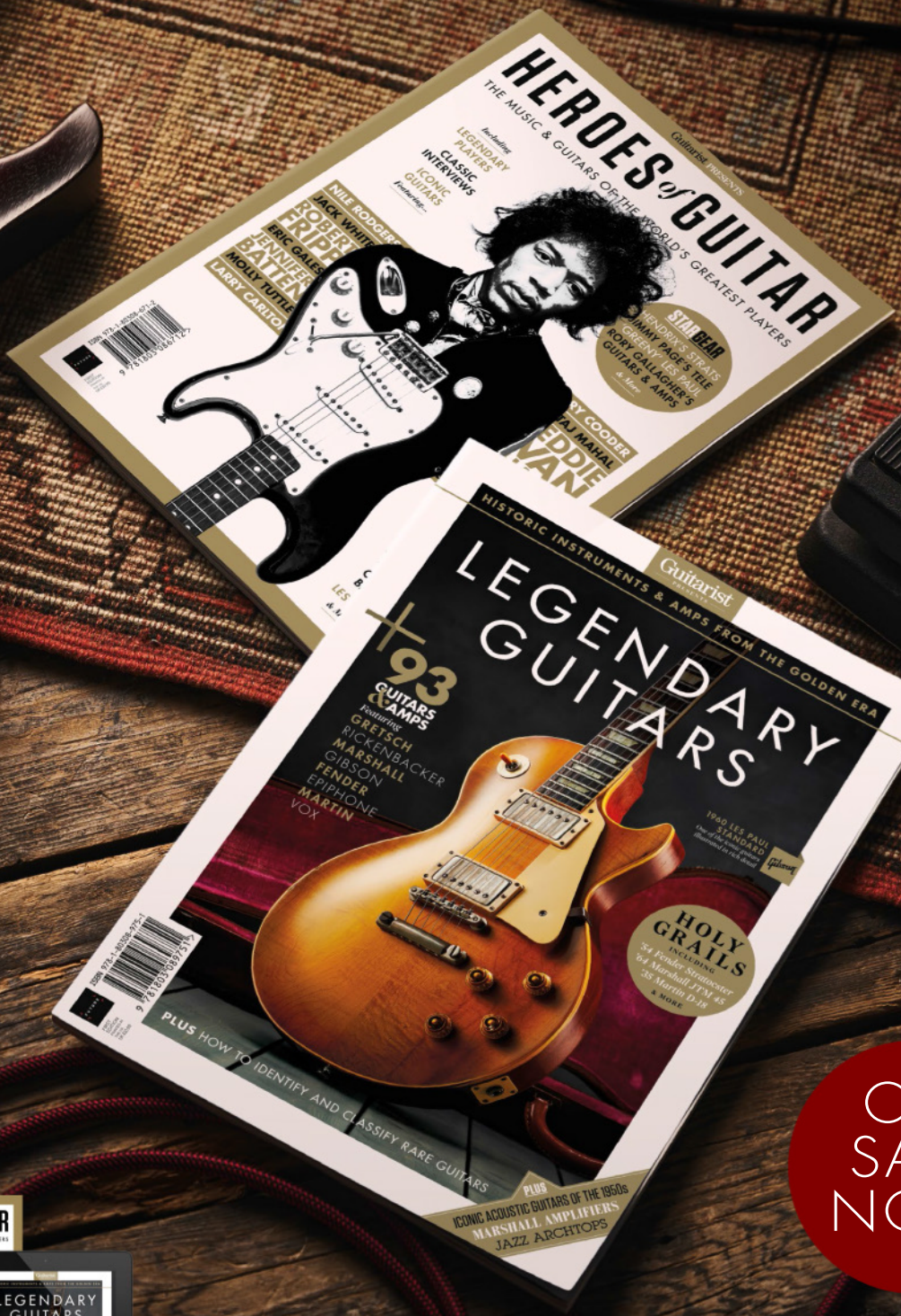

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Rising Star

Having relaunched its Aurora model in 2023, co-designed by Billy F Gibbons, Cream T's latest addition is the entirely new 'super-S' style Polaris Custom. But where's the rockstar and the pickup swapping?

Words Dave Burrluck
Photography Phil Barker

CREAM T POLARIS CUSTOM £2,499

CONTACT **Cream T Custom Shop** PHONE **01695 570023** WEB **www.creamtcustomshop.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **Cream T guitars, not pickups?**
Cream T is primarily known as a pickup maker here in the UK, but the company began making guitars, too, initially the Aurora and Crossfire, which feature the innovative Relish-licensed pickup-swapping system.

2. **Who makes these?**
Originally, Cream T guitars were made by the ill-fated UK Guitar Builders (UKGB) team in York. When that venture closed at the start of 2023, a new partner was found in the UK and the Version 2 Aurora was launched in mid-2023.

3. **This looks like a Tom Anderson or Suhr...**
We hear you and we put this exact observation to Cream T's owner, Tim Lobley (read more on page 90). In truth, this super-S style has its roots in plenty of custom makers like James Tyler, Tom Anderson through to John Suhr and quite a few others: a modded hot-rod based on the Stratocaster. It's a classic recipe, and aside from the standard model we have here, you can custom-order your own dream machine, too.

An increasing number of smaller guitar makers seem to be making their own pickups in-house these days, just like the big guns have always done. Pickup makers more rarely step into the dusty world of guitar making – and Cream T is one exception. Although its production is quite limited, the guitars so far have been anything but. Along with pulling in big star names such as Billy F Gibbons, the company has been championing innovative pickup-swapping with both of its models so far: the flat-topped single-cut Aurora and the offset Crossfire, originally made by UK Guitar Builders and now by a new UK-based manufacturing partner. As we reported back in issue 503, the clean, crisp build has been retained with the Version 2 Aurora Custom and the Crossfire should be back shortly. In the meantime, the Cream T team, headed by Tim Lobley, has something new to share: the Polaris Custom.

Now, it doesn't offer that pickup-swapping potential – the pickups load from the back of the guitar, which means a Strat-style vibrato with its rear-placed springs can't be used, although we understand a hardtail version with pickup swapping will be available soon. Nevertheless, the Polaris is impressive from the off. The HSS super-S has always been a journeyman guitar and the Polaris certainly keeps that flag flying. What it might lack in originality is made up for in craft and functionality. It even comes in a rather good Mono-style high-density carry bag aimed at the gigging musician, rather than the collector.

1. Unlike Cream T's Crossfire bolt-on that featured a more bulbous and Fender-y headstock style, there's a bit of a nod to more contemporary makers such as Suhr with this outline

2. The Gotoh 510 vibrato sits flush with the body face, although the shallow recess means you get pretty standard up-lift. Tuning stability with the rear-lock tuners and Tusq nut is spot on, too

The HSS super-S has always been a journeyman guitar and the Polaris certainly keeps that flag flying

That impression is more than apparent as we pull out the guitar, which has a delectable weight of 3.21kg (7.1lb). Perfectly in tune and perfectly set up, you're good to go from the off with little more than some string stretching. But, c'mon, it's a £2.5k piece so you shouldn't be surprised.

That good weight is achieved by using solid obeche for the body topped with a AAA-grade centre-joined maple top, with natural edge 'binding' that's approximately

3. Becoming ubiquitous for boutique bolt-on builds, the figured roasted maple here is very deep in colour. The fingerboard has a subtle compound radius and the frets have good height without overdoing the girth

6mm in thickness and 'dropped' (as the originator Tom Anderson calls it) over the forearm contour. Unlike some super-S designs, the outline retains the fuller (not thinned) horns of the Stratocaster; the bass-side horn is slightly thicker, if anything. The back has a deep vintage-style ribcage cut-out, too, while the heel is contoured and the textured aluminium neckplate – which follows the sloping curve of the heel – is nicely recessed, flush with the back surface and also features an engraved Cream T logo and serial number.

As we've seen with quite a few UK makers – Atkin, Seth Baccus, Patrick James Eggle and PJD, for example – the neck wood choice is roasted maple, quarter-sawn with a strong figure. The finish is a satin acrylic; it feels almost like bare wood to the touch. And although we don't get things like the graphite reinforcement and stainless-steel frets of the more progressive-style makers, we do get a nod in that direction with those glow-in-the dark Luminlay side dots.

Gotoh hardware is used throughout: rear-lock dual-height tuners and the steel Gotoh 510 two-post vibrato, with a die-cast block, which has a recess to maximise up-bend. In keeping with its hot-rod roots, there's no rear spring cavity cover, although the coverplate for the rear-mount controls is recessed. All three of the purpose-designed Cream T Polaris pickups direct-mount to the body, so there's no need to have a scratchplate marring that figured maple.

There's a very appealing vintage-vibe here without the spike that some Strats can veer towards

Feel & Sounds

While the style is fairly generic and the Polaris comes across as very familiar, it is carefully considered. The fingerboard, for example, has a subtle compound radius that you probably wouldn't notice, while the medium jumbo frets are perfectly installed and, unlike some, have good width and height (measured at approximately 2.6mm wide and 1.25mm high) without feeling over-big. The fret tangs are notched, too, so you don't see the slots on the edges of the fingerboard.

THE RIVALS

Tom Anderson's guitars have long been coveted for their über attention to detail and the Drop Top has been an industry standard for many years; Peach Guitars in the UK has a good selection from £4,999. Suhr is another long-running USA maker that excels at contemporary Fender-inspired designs like the Modern Plus: expect to pay £3.5k upwards depending on specification. Tyler, as stocked by GuitarGuitar, is another pioneer of the hot-rod super-S style and offers the Japanese-made Studio Elite from around £3.5k; expect to pay £6k plus for the superb USA models. PRS's Fiore (£2,829) doesn't feature a maple top but the light ash bodied bolt-on is a real workhorse built to typically high standard with some tricky switching, too. The only options, however, are colours. Closer to home, Patrick James Eggle's 96 Contour Top (from £3,800) is probably already on your radar. With superb craft and lots of custom options, it's a real dream machine.

There's no fancy name for the neck profile, just 'medium C', with a very Fender-y nut width and a depth of 21.9mm at the 1st fret and 23.2mm by the 12th. It's a little deeper than Cream T's earlier Crossfire model and, to be honest, we'd call it a medium-deep C. Either way, it's superbly done. As we mentioned, setup is spot on with some light relief and very standard string heights of 1.5mm on the high E, 1.8mm on the low E. And, of course, we have the truss rod adjustment at the body end of the neck – it's very easy to tweak, though we didn't touch it.

The Gotoh 510 vibrato is an industry standard and here it sits virtually flush with the body, although the rear recess means we still get a semi-tone lift on the high E. After basic string stretching the stability and return to pitch is very good.

Rather like the style and build, there are no surprises to the sounds we hear but no disappointments, either, dishing up a very flavoursome pair of Strat-y single coils with plenty of woody depth and sparkle in the highs. Whether it's the feel of the neck or these sounds alone, there's a very appealing vintage-vibe going on here without the sometimes ear-wearing spike that some

4. These bespoke Gotoh T-style knobs have an engraved 'full on' line, typical of the subtle detail. That mini toggle 'Hot' switch is fast in use, even though the lever seems quite tall

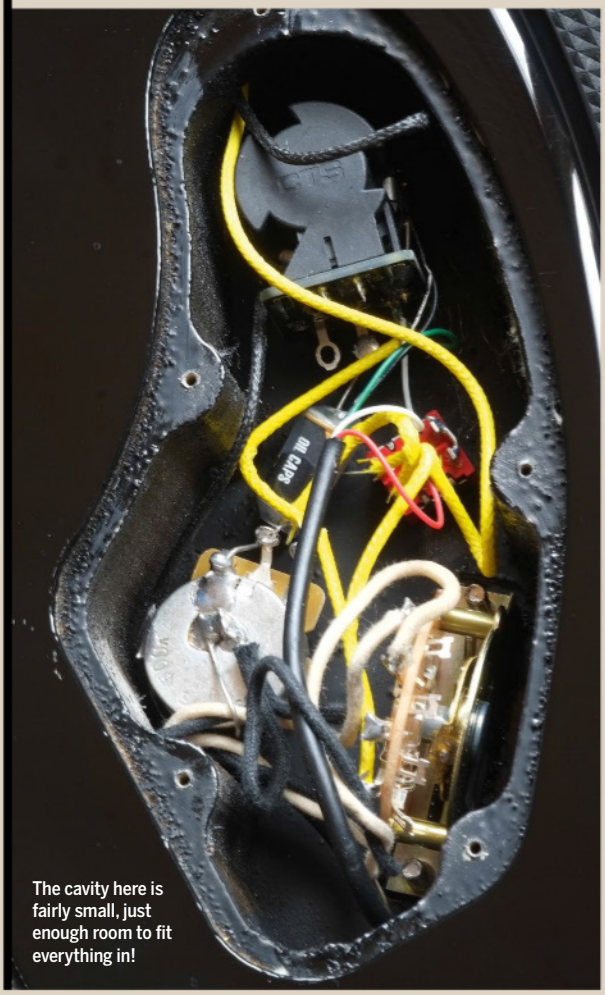
5. The Cream T Polaris HSS set is typically tidy and good-sounding. They're well voiced for this guitar, with sweet depth and sparkle from the single coils and throaty power at the bridge

UNDER THE HOOD

Does the circuit suit the style?

The HSS style of guitar can get quite complex as you're mixing humbuckers and single coils, but the Polaris goes for a pretty straightforward circuit. So we have a standard CTS 500kohms volume pot, a 500k PCB pull-switch CTS tone control for the coil-split with a Cream T Oil Cap rated at .022µF and an Oak Grigsby-style five-way lever switch with that small mini-toggle 'Hot' switch, which sends the bridge pickup (in either full humbucker or split mode, which voices the slug coil) direct to the output and bypasses the volume and tone controls. The circuit is wired modern-style, but there's no treble bleed capacitor on the volume, or – as many use – a resistor on each of the single coils, which allows them to 'see' the equivalent of approximately 250k. The rear cavity is screed with conductive paint; the coverplate has a foil screen, too.

At the bridge, the covered and potted Polaris humbucker has been designed by Cream T's Richard Whitney. It uses a thinner 44 AWG coil wire, which accounts for its hefty (measured) DCR of 16.72kohms and 8.47k when the slug coil is voiced. The single coils actually use a vintage-style stagger to their Alnico V rod magnets and use standard 42 AWG coil wire, measuring 6.33k at the neck and 5.76k in the middle position. Obviously, Cream T offers plenty of pickup options, not least in terms of more classic or hot vintage-style humbuckers. Just ask!



The cavity here is fairly small, just enough room to fit everything in!

Nicely round-nosed, this sort of heel shaping is pretty common for this 'improved' style. The Polaris's serial numbers start at 433. Why? It's the distance from Earth to the North Star in light years, of course!

Strats can veer towards. There's plenty of kick from the bridge humbucker, too, and many of us could easily just use this pickup on a gig, even though a subtle treble bleed circuit on the volume control might just help to keep some of that sizzle as you pull it back. It also splits very well; the slug coil has a bit of older humbucking 'honk' that's far from anaemic or overly thin sounding. That 'Hot' switch is handy for a fast-action solo voice without touching the five-way selector and, as ever, there's a subtle volume and sizzle boost as it's engaged. Like we said, it's not really bringing anything new to the table, but there's very little, if anything, we'd change.

Verdict

It is a little odd that we refer to what is effectively a four-decade-old design as 'modern'. In terms of the neck shape, which is relatively deep for the style, and the voicing of the guitar, the Polaris 'Classic' might have been a better name. Many of us might feel like it's a guitar we've played back in the day before the style was 'hijacked' by more modernist makers with their shred-

> That 'Hot' switch is handy for a fast-action solo voice without touching the five-way selector

aimed thin necks, with or without carbon fibre reinforcement, and stainless-steel frets. Either way, it's hard to find fault here, and while £2.5k ain't cheap in anyone's book you only need to check the prices of similar styles from USA makers such as Tom Anderson and Suhr to see that it's very attractive.

Of course, the platform has plenty of potential. Some classy – or brasher – opaque colours might be welcome for those of us who have seen enough figured maple. And lightly-aged nickel hardware might suit the 'Classic' style, too. But, hey, that's all in the future. For now, it's another string to Cream T's bow – we can't wait to try the pickup-swapping version either. A rising star, indeed!

CREAM T POLARIS CUSTOM

PRICE: £2,499 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Double-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: Obeche with AAA thin maple top
NECK: Quarter-sawn roasted maple, medium C profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/42.7mm
FINGERBOARD: Roasted maple, 6mm black dot inlays (w/ blue Luminlay side dots), 254-356mm (10-14") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: 2-post Gotoh 510 vibrato, Gotoh rear-locking tuners – chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: Cream T Polaris covered humbucker (bridge) w/ Polaris single coils (middle & neck), 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone (with pull-switch coil-split for bridge humbucker), 'Hot' switch (direct out bridge pickup)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.21/7.1
OPTIONS: Rosewood fingerboard, HSH pickup configuration. The Polaris will be available with pickup swapping (hardtail only) later this year. It can be custom-ordered as the 'Crème de la Crème' model with your choice of woods, hardware, custom inlays, stainless steel frets, etc (£POA)
RANGE OPTIONS: Cream T's other current models include the Aurora Custom (£2,499) and the Aurora BFGT2 (£2,999); both are available with or without pickup swapping
LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently
FINISHES: Sirius Blue (as reviewed), Antares Red, Black Hole Burst, Terra Burst – coloured gloss polyurethane body; satin natural acrylic neck

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Crisp build and clean design; excellent neck shape and feel; top-class hardware with sounds to match; a very well turned out guitar!

CONS Derivative design that lacks the innovation and originality of previous Cream T models

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Star Trek

We discuss the evolution of the new Polaris Custom with Cream T owner, Tim Lobley, and the seemingly perennial appeal for the hot-rod super-S

Words Dave Burrluck

For a guitar design that evolved from the late 70s and was a very big part of the 80s, the super-S never really went away, although it does seem to be enjoying quite a revival with its typically HSS or HSH pickup configuration. Alongside brands that have always made them, recent years saw guitarist Mark Lettieri create his HSS PRS Fiore – a classic super-S if ever we saw one – and we've seen Chapman's ML1 Workshop Series X and plenty of other makers, not least Patrick James Eggle with his 96, ploughing the genre. But as we've said in our review, Cream T's guitars have been rather more innovative in their designs up to this point.

"I feel we have been about innovation a lot," considers Tim, "but that's not for everybody. Some people need a more standard guitar. As the owner of a guitar shop [Sound Affects], I'm aware it's actually quite difficult for a lot of shops to access premium USA brands like Tom Anderson and Suhr. So, while the Polaris isn't intended to be a copy of those, there is certainly a comparison [to be made] and I simply wanted to have a really, really good-quality guitar in that style that was accessible to more people and, moreover, was UK-made with quality components."

Cream T's owner, Tim Lobley, has plenty on his plate with new pickups and guitars in the pipeline, not to mention his retail store, Sound Affects

"We had constant positive feedback on the neck from people who played the prototype"

Rather than just sketch out a quick super-S design and send it to Cream T's manufacturing partner, the Polaris – named after the Northern Star – has had a more convoluted birth. "The full story is that the Polaris concept came to me via Mark Smith [a MI veteran who worked with Cream T on its recent rebranding for a short period of time]; he'd been working on it for a couple of years at that point," Tim tells us. "He was very involved in the design of it. Simon McBride [Deep Purple guitarist] had a little bit of input in it, too, I understand and, obviously, Mark was the go-to man for Tom Anderson for many years through World Guitars. So he conceived the idea. Patrick James Eggle's team did the CAD/CNC work. I've spoken to Pat about this and while he didn't do any of the design, his team was used to help turn Mark's ideas into a technical drawing, as it were.

"From that, prototyping was done a couple of years ago through Wildwood Manufacturing in the USA who do woodworking for some quite major brands. The original idea was that it was going to be bought in like a partscaster and then finished and assembled in the UK. But I wanted it to be produced entirely in the UK, so we've turned that prototype into a guitar that is now completely UK-made.

"The project is now around three years old and I came to it about a year ago. It was going to be a brand in its own right with a range of guitars. But I bought the rights to the design, so it's now within the Cream T range. I have changed some things from that original design; it's evolved a bit. The heel you see there is very different from the prototype. The neck shape is the same, but I added the 'Hot' switch – I always like those. It was originally conceived as a 24-fret design, but I changed that to 22, although down the line we hope to offer a 24-fret version as well.

"As to the neck shape, it's the thing we had constant positive feedback on from people who've played the prototype. Everyone's gone, 'Wow, that neck shape is unbelievable!' I think it's actually an iterative process to end up where we are and I'm very confident – although there is plenty of hand-work involved post-CNC – that the neck you have there will be what everyone gets.

"We will have the pickup-swapping version early in 2024," Tim confirms, "a double-humbucker version of what you

1. Cream T's offset Crossfire, which includes a pickup-swapping system, was launched in 2022, co-designed by Tim Lobley and PJD's Leigh Dovey. It will be back in production in early 2024
2. The obeche back of the Polaris is lightly weight-relieved to compensate for the heavier maple top
3. The final maple-topped body is very cleanly machined and ready for its colour coats

have. The fixed-pickup version will be available in HSS – and HSH and probably HH, too – but the pickup-swapping will only be HH and that, of course, is with a hardtail bridge, not a vibrato."

Crème de la Crème

While the standard Polaris currently has limited options like a choice of fingerboard woods, pickup configuration and colour, Cream T's 'Crème de la Crème' level is effectively a no-limits custom service. "This is where we can select even higher quality and more figured woods, an ebony fingerboard with bespoke Polaris Star inlays," says Tim. "We can do all stainless-steel frets, different tops, neck woods, body woods.... The design stays the same, but you can alter the ingredients – what you request affects the final price."

Speaking of woods, why did lightweight obeche get the gig on the Polaris? "We experimented with different woods on the Crossfire, using different back woods with a maple cap. We used things like ash, swamp ash and we used obeche. I found obeche with a maple top to be a really nice combination. Having a retail store offering this style of guitar, one of the first things we're often asked is, 'What does that guitar weigh?' I think having it light is a really good thing. You don't get a super-nice bit of grain [with obeche] that you can leave open pore on the back, but we could do that in Crème de la Crème if people wanted it."

And the Polaris has a new set of Cream T pickups, too. "Most of what we've done to date has been very much aimed at the vintage market in terms of both humbuckers and single coils," says Tim. "But this is clearly a more modern guitar so we decided to design a set of pickups specially for that. Also, since the departure of [original Cream T founder] Thomas Nilsen, Richard Whitney has really come into his own, designing new pickups like the Cream Of The Crop and the Hot Sauce, so I wanted to give him the opportunity to put his mark on the Polaris – which he absolutely loves – and create something that all fits nicely together, rather than taking one of our existing humbuckers and glueing it to a couple of single coils."

Could we request other Cream T pickups without it becoming a hugely expensive custom order, we wonder? "Yes, I don't see why not," concludes Tim. "We'll probably do different runs of the Polaris with different pickups. We have the Nocebo pickups [an HSS pickup set designed for Dave Foster who plays with Steve Rothery] and they would drop into there quite nicely. But if you wanted one with a BFG Whiskerbucker, we can do that, and with the pickup-swapping version you can have whatever you want." G

Modern Moves

Two new Les Pauls are added to the Modern strand of Gibson's slowly expanding USA guitars with quite a specification and cost difference. Which one to go for?

Words Dave Burrluck
Photography Phil Barker

GIBSON LES PAUL MODERN FIGURED & MODERN LITE £2,999 & £1,499

CONTACT **Gibson** WEB **www.gibson.com**

What You Need To Know

1 **Blimey, Gibson seems to be launching a lot of guitars recently. Are these really new?**
Yes and no. Since the new regime started in 2019, Gibson has clearly separated its USA guitars into Original and Modern Collections. So our Modern Figured is basically the existing Modern Les Paul but with a figured top and three translucent finishes, as opposed to the opaque Faded Pelham Blue, Sparkling Burgundy and Graphite top colours of the standard model. The Modern Lite is brand-new.

2 **How so?**
Up to this point in the Modern Collection, the start-up LP models have been the Les Paul Tribute and Les Paul Special Tribute. Although you'll still find these in-store, technically they have been discontinued. The new Modern Lite has a thinner all-mahogany body, with a carved top, and a mahogany neck.

3 **Do they both use those new-fangled PCB circuit boards?**
The Modern Figured uses the same four pull-switch circuit you'll find in the new high-line Les Paul Supreme, the Les Paul Modern and the Les Paul Classic. The Modern Lite is old-school: no pull switches or PCBs.

There's a sharp dividing line between Gibson USA's models – Original and Modern – that should mean if you're more vintage-specific, then you go for the former, and if you like a few more sounds and some contemporary upgrades, not to mention colours, you'd go for the latter. Simple...except there's plenty of crossover in style, not to mention price.

Along with the recent launch of the £4k Les Paul Supreme, with a model name that originally appeared a couple of decades ago, two more new additions to the Modern Collection illustrate the diversity further. Our new Modern Figured, priced at £3k, is basically a slightly pared-back Supreme, but the Modern Lite is half that price and although it's bundled into the same strand of the catalogue, it is a *very* different guitar. Importantly, Gibson tells us, "although the Modern Lite is not billed as a direct replacement for the Tributes, they are taking their place as the entry-level model from USA. The Tributes have been discontinued."

The Modern Figured is a slightly upgraded Modern Les Paul, and shares plenty with that new Supreme: it's a pretty posh-looking 'Paul with an upmarket ebony fingerboard, which advertises (but doesn't specify) a compound radius, sparkling mother-of-pearl inlays, an AAA figured top and a trio of, well, 'modern' colours. Ours is Cobalt

1

THE RIVALS

Along with Fender's finest, the Gibson Les Paul is the most copied and cloned guitar there is. Loosely called the 'single-cut', there aren't many makers, big or small, around the world that don't use this time-honoured recipe (of course, you'll have to put up with the wrong headstock and an altered body shape). USA-made Heritage is a case in point: its Standard Collection H-150 streets around £2.5k, while a Custom Shop Core Collection model will add a couple of grand to that. PRS has the S2 10th Anniversary McCarty 594 Singlecut with USA 58/15 LT pickups at £2.5k; the Core-level Singlecut 594 starts at £4,360. European makers such as Maybach are worth a look, plus the Chinese-made Eastmans.

Still 'in the family', Epiphone's Les Pauls get better and better. The Kirk Hammett 'Greeny' is a superb Les Paul and at £1,499 it's the same price as our reviewed (and more basic) Modern Lite.

Burst, a strong blue 'bursted over the maple top that's edged with a bright white binding and a translucent blue over the back, sides and neck back, which looks much darker, almost black. Not surprisingly, we get the 'Ultra-Modern' weight relief – sticking this one on the scales, it weighs 3.85kg (8.47lb). A good start.

The centre-joined maple top certainly has a nice thinly flamed figure, even if it appears to be slip-matched, rather than perfectly bookmatched. It's not easy to see the back wood through the finish, but under bright daylight you can see some strong grain stripping and the fact that it's centre-joined and pretty much quarter-sawn. Then you notice the contoured heel, or rather the specific area of the body right behind the heel that's machined away, reducing the bulk under the top frets.

Outwardly, there's little else that shouts 'modern'. Yes, rear-lock tuners weren't around in the late 50s, but they've been with us for decades. And even though each control has a pull-switch activated alternate function, again, we're taking basic stuff: so-called 'coil-taps' (which offer "Gibson humbucker and single coil P-90 sounds", says Gibson), a phase switch and a direct-to-output switch for the bridge humbucker. Extras if you want them, then, but keep the controls pushed down and its business as usual.

Simple Style

The Modern Lite takes quite a different route and is the latest in quite a long line of 'cut-price' Gibsons, not least the outgoing Tribute, which under-cuts the Modern Lite by £250, and the long-running 'economy' Les Paul, the Studio, which is only £100 more expensive. What's the deal here?

First off, the body – all mahogany with no weight relief – is much thinner than

1. The Modern Figured model uses Alnico V Burstbucker Pros: at the bridge is the Pro +, the slightly hotter version of the standard 'treble' pickup
2. The Modern Lite uses a Gibson 490R in the neck position and 498T at the bridge – both are uncovered and use different magnets
3. These smart control knobs unleash Gibson's 'modern' pull-switch functions for 'coil-tap', out of phase and direct-out for the bridge pickup

> There's some commonality between the Modern and Lite… [but] each has a very distinct feel

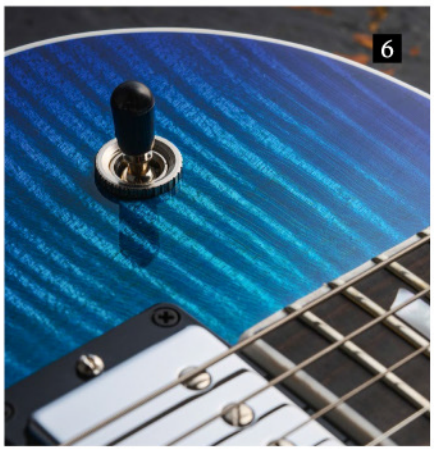
4

5

4. The Modern Figured's headstock is a blank canvas, although the rear-lock tuners will instantly tell you it's not a 'Burst replica

5. Although the Modern Lite comes in a choice of five colours, each one features the same black open-coiled humbuckers and pickguard

6. The Figured's Cobalt Burst is a vibrant finish that's 'bursted over the maple top, while the back and sides, and neck back, look much darker. The body is edged with a contrasting white binding



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the classic Les Paul, creating a very light weight of 3.03kg (6.67lb). In depth, it measures 45mm at the apex of the carved top and 33mm at the rim, instead of the 62mm/50mm dimensions of the full-fat Modern Figured. The actual top carve looks a little shallower than the Modern Figured, an impression that's enhanced by the five opaque satin 'open pore' colours.

Gibson refers to these hues as "attention-grabbing", and while that accurately describes our Cardinal Red review sample, the other four colours are a little pared back, a little more classy. Unlike the Modern Figured, and many other LPs, these colours cover not just the top but the whole guitar – including the headstock for the first time on a Les Paul model – with the exception of the unbound, dot-inlaid rosewood fingerboard. What's underneath is anyone's guess, although the grain you can see looks like it's a centre-joined two-piece body with a one-piece neck.

Despite the different colours, all have the same uncovered black humbuckers, a black pickguard, black knobs and black toggle switch tip, which do visually pull the level down a bit. Clearly, this Lite is an exercise in economy, price-conscious craft, but you can't help thinking certain colours would look a little cooler with some zebra pickup bobbins, cream and amber parts, or even those classy transparent top-hat knobs we see on the Modern Figured, for example.

Nevertheless, there's some commonality, too. Obviously, the scale length and the medium jumbo fretwire, which is pretty much standard for the USA models, and we get the same Nashville-style tune-o-matic with a lightweight aluminium stop tailpiece on both, as well as the 'wider than vintage-style' aluminium strap buttons.

The Modern Lite, the latest 'cut-price' Gibson, is much thinner than the classic Les Paul

Feel & Sounds

If we were told these two Les Pauls were made in completely different factories, we'd believe it. Each has a very distinct feel. There's the substantially different weights for one thing, then the seated balance, the ribcage cut on the Lite, not to mention its only slightly radiused edges. Even the necks, while similar, have a contrasting feel thanks to their disparate finishes: the Modern Figured is highly glossed and very smooth, but the Modern Lite's more textured feel isn't bad. The SlimTaper profiles present a relatively thin-depthed shallow C with big-ish shoulders and are virtually identical. Measured with our callipers we get: 20.7mm at the 1st fret and 23.2mm at the 12th on our Figured; and 20.9mm/23.6mm on the Lite.

As to that compound radius of the Figured, we measured that at approximately

241mm (9.5 inches) in front of the nut and 305mm (12 inches) at the fingerboard end; the Lite sticks to the standard 305mm (12-inch) radius. Fretwork is pretty good on both – the Figured frets actually sit over the edge binding without the more usual nibs (another Modern-ism) and appear more polished than the slightly grittier feel of the Lite's frets.

Setup wise, there's not a lot in it. Both necks were arrow straight with slightly different string heights on arrival, so we introduced some very slight relief and standardised the string heights at 1.5mm (0.06 inches) on the treble side, 1.8mm (0.07 inches) on the bass. To be picky, the nut slots on the Figured are slightly high, too, less so on the Lite, and the Lite has a slightly steeper neck angle that means the bridge sits about 1.2mm higher. We can live with that.

These subtleties in feel and finish are noticeable – and they're magnified by the slightly square fingerboard edges of the Lite, which also has lower height frets, meaning you can feel the more textured grain of the rosewood over the smoother ebony of the Figured. The effect of the compound radius fingerboard? Well, with those over-high nut slots, it's hard to comment on. 'Subtle' would be our take.

Unplugged, the differences are easier to evaluate. The Figured has that typical strong, punchy and quite wide-sounding ring, whereas the Lite is – you guessed it – a little lighter and less wide-sounding. SG fans will feel at home with the Lite: it's a little brasher and more raw-sounding, too.

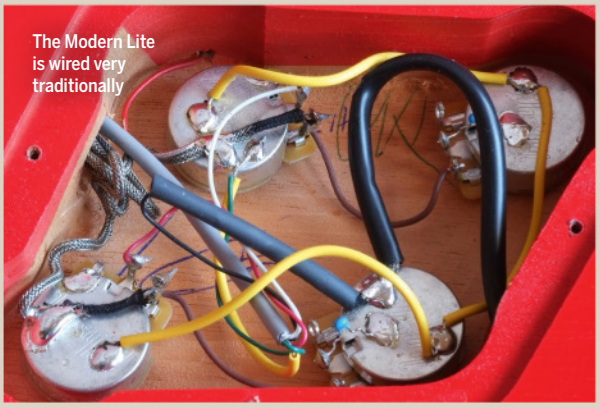
Again, with different pickups you're in for a rather different experience plugged in. The Lite has a pretty classic mid-focused punch that would sit well in 70s Who and classic-era Clash. There's not the high-end detail we hear on the Figured, nor the depth, and despite the high DCR measurement, the bridge pickup kicks and has thickness, but it's not overdone. It might be very light on your shoulder and yet, as we said, its SG-like classic rock and beyond credentials shine through.

The Figured is a Les Paul model with considerable clout, depth and clarity, but it sounds more refined. We compared it to our reference 2019 Les Paul Classic (with retrofitted Burstbucker 2 at the bridge and 1 at the neck) with the same pull-switch

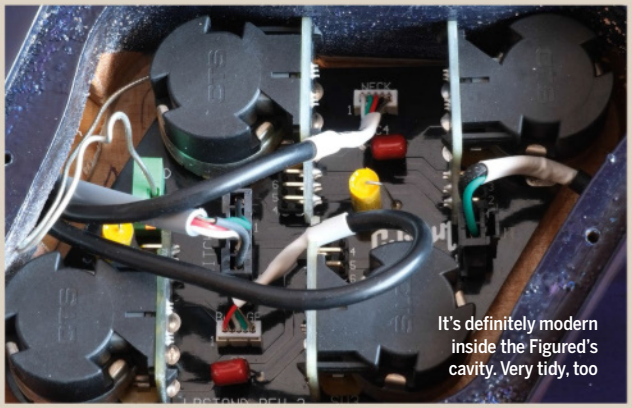
There's nothing modern about the control functions on the Modern Lite – it's a standard Les Paul drive

UNDER THE HOOD

Unsurprisingly, the electrics are just as different as the guitars themselves



The Modern Lite is wired very traditionally



It's definitely modern inside the Figured's cavity. Very tidy, too

Opening up the Figured, its Modern name is reflected in what we see: a very tidy-looking array of PCB-mounted pull-switch pots connected to the pickups, toggle switch and output jack with no-solder, push-in Quick Connect plugs. The circuit board has a 'LPSTAND REV.2' identifier. Pots are the high-quality CTS PCB style, the tone caps are brown mylar .022µF (223k), and the taller (what look like Mallory) caps are .01µF (103k) and are used to simply filter one coil, to provide the 'coil-tap' switching.

There's no coil-split involved as the DCR doesn't change when you pull up the 'coil-tap' switch, although on the bridge pickup, when you pull up the pure bypass switch it does change to a higher reading.

The 'Modern' designation doesn't really apply to the Lite's circuit. Unscrew the recessed rear cover and we see a completely unscreened cavity with traditional hand-wired components. Unlike the outgoing LP Tribute, for example, it's PCB-free. No surprises, then. The Gibson logo'd 500k pots are wired modern-style, each tone with a very small blue .022µF capacitor. The pickup leads are vintage-style single conductor, so if you fancy adding any coil-splits, you'll need new pickups. Still, with a cavity depth of between 23mm and 29mm, you'd struggle to use a standard pull-push pot.

The different flavours of Gibson humbuckers help shape what we hear. The long-running 490R 'Modern Classic' and 498T 'Hot Alnico' will be very familiar to Gibson fans. The 490R uses an Alnico II magnet with a published DCR of 8kohms; the 498T uses an Alnico V magnet with a DCR of 14.2k and probably a thinner coil wire. We stay with Alnico V for the Burstbucker Pros: the neck 'rhythm' pickup is advertised with a pretty classic PAF-style DCR of 7.8k and the Pro +, which Gibson tells us is "the hotter/overwound version of the Burstbucker Pro Lead/Treble pickup", measures at output 8.36k or 8.5k in pure bypass mode without the volume and tone control in circuit.

QUICK CONNECT!

PCB versus hand-wired control circuits divide opinion, but the solderless Quick Connect system hasn't been abandoned by Gibson. Many tone tinkerers, especially of the vintage-only variety, will happily denounce PCBs and no-solder push-in connectors (for the outlying toggle switch, output jack and pickups) as the work of dark forces. That's probably a debate for another day, but our experience in gigging and recording has been nothing but positive and, of course, it means you can change pickups pretty quickly without heating up your soldering iron – so long as you have other Quick Connect types. But although Gibson has made virtually all of its pickups readily available via the recent Pickup Shop aimed at us aftermarket modders, none currently use the Quick Connect system. Hmm.

"We still manufacture the Quick Connect stuff for Gibson USA," Gibson USA's Jason Davidson told us recently. "Gibson was actually using the Quick Connect stuff back as far as the late 70s on different models, but we started formalising it into Gibson USA production, on regular production models, around 2007. It was around 2012/'13 when we did start to sell a few models aftermarket with the Quick Connect like '57 Classics, the Angus Young models, the Dirty Fingers. We offered those with the Quick Connect system, but they didn't actually sell very well. I've been here 25 years, but I was involved with the Pickup Shop at that point and they were discontinued shortly after.

> "While we don't currently offer Quick Connect versions aftermarket, just keep an eye out" ***Jason Davidson, Pickup Shop***

"As I said, we still use Quick Connects at the factory and since [pickup designer] Jared Brandon and myself have come onboard with the Pickup Shop, we've received a *lot* of requests for the Quick Connect pickups," Jason added. "So I can say that while we don't currently offer Quick Connect versions aftermarket, just keep an eye out: we haven't forgotten those customers because there are tens of thousands of guitars out there with the Quick Connect system."

In the meantime, eBay and the like might be your friend. We bagged a set of unpotted Quick Connect Burstbuckers for our reference Les Paul Classic (with the same PCB circuit as our reviewed Modern Figured) as an option to the factory fitted, uncovered and potted Burstbucker 61 zebras, while Gibson's Jim DeCola graciously sent us a set of Quick Connect T-Types. It's certainly fun to mix and match that trio while the soldering iron stays in the toolbox.

Quick Connect Gibson T-Types ready for a no-solder load-in

7. While the Modern Figured features a contoured heel, the Modern Lite doesn't. Here, you can see the open-pore satin finish of the Lite, too

circuit, and if anything the Figured sounds just a little smoother, with a slightly more open midrange. The pickups are supposed to be potted here, but while the bridge probably is, the neck pickup doesn't sound it to our ears.

We have an unfair advantage here in that the Les Paul Classic gets a lot of use, so we're used to the 'coil-taps', which pull down the highs a little, almost like you've slightly pulled back on a wah pedal with barely any volume drop. And they're *not* single coil: they're humbucking in both modes. They certainly don't sound like standard coil-splits, but we think they have a very usable character, especially in the dual-pickup mix and when you bring the phase switch into use. It does a 'Greeny' nicely – just pull back one of the volumes a little. But pull up the bridge tone switch and we get the full output of the bridge pickup, instantly giving a little extra sizzle. More sounds? They're definitely there if you want them.

If you play in a pretty rocking 'one-two-three-four, see you at the other end' kinda band, the Lite would be our choice. And while the Figured doesn't quite have that specific raw punch, it does have a lot more and, like any good Les Paul, it covers considerable ground with added textures that you won't get on your vintage-style LP.

8

The Figured is a Les Paul model with considerable clout, depth and clarity, but it sounds more refined than our LP Classic

Verdict

Along with the price, there's an ocean of difference between these guitars. They share the Modern name and some parts – and both have 'Gibson' on the headstock! – but that's about it. Unfortunately, both also share a few lapses in the finer details, and although those would be swiftly sorted in-store, you are left with the feeling that both have been slightly rushed off the production line.

The 'but' is that both sound rather good, with stable tuning. The lightweight Modern Lite's more straightforward, rawer voice is classic all-mahogany Gibson that could easily do good service as an affordable spare or alternately tuned slide guitar. The Modern Figured adds considerably more sounds with additional clarity and width, and some nice touches such as that contoured heel. It's probably fair to say we'll see more changes to the evolving Modern Collection in 2024, but both new additions have purpose and validity, providing even more choice for the Gibson fanbase.

8. In keeping with its Modern name, the Figured has a compound radius fingerboard. Also, the fret ends sit over the binding with no 'nibs' like the more historic models

GIBSON LES PAUL MODERN FIGURED

PRICE: £2,999 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: 2-piece mahogany with carved AAA figured maple top
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, SlimTaper profile with contoured heel, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.1mm
FINGERBOARD: Single-bound ebony, mother-of-pearl trapezoid inlays, measured 241-305mm (9.5-12") compound radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Nashville tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece, Grover Rotomatic rear-locking tuners w/ keystone buttons – chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: Covered Gibson Burstbucker Pro (neck) and Pro + (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup each with pull-switches for coil-tap, phase and bypass
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.85/8.47
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: LP Modern with 3 solid top colours (£2,799); LP Classic (£2,399) uses the same pull-switch wiring but with uncovered 60s Burstbuckers. More opulent LP Supreme (£3,999) shares many features with the Modern Figured, including pickups and circuit
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISHES: Cobalt Burst (as reviewed), Cherry Burst, Seafoam Green – gloss nitrocellulose

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Good build; great weight; flame top option to standard Modern LP specification including contoured heel; expansive voicing with the four pull-switch functions

CONS Slightly sharper setup would be preferable

GIBSON LES PAUL MODERN LITE

PRICE: £1,499 (inc soft shell case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany with carved top
NECK: Mahogany, SlimTaper profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.2mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood, acrylic dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Nashville tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece, Grover Mini Rotomatic tuners w/ kidney buttons – chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: Uncovered Gibson 490R (neck) and 498T (bridge) humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.03/6.67
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Other cost effective 'Moderns' include the unbound LP Studio (£1,599); LP Tribute (£1,249) has a thinner depth body with maple neck and covered 490T/490R humbuckers; slab-bodied LP Special Tribute with wrapover bridge (and humbuckers or P-90s) (£1,029)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISHES: Cardinal Red (as reviewed), TV Wheat, Gold Mist, Inverness Green, Rose Gold– satin nitrocellulose with colour-matched headstocks

8/10

PROS Lightweight build; thinner body; good colour choice; strong classic rock mahogany-Gibbo sounds

CONS Feels a little unfinished: frets need better polishing, fingerboard edges could be lightly rolled, and one-colour-only plastic parts cheapen the deal; some might conclude it's a tad expensive, too

Les Is More

Throw a plectrum in any guitar shop, and you're likely to hit at least one single-cut. Here are six gig-ready workhorses...

PRS SE MCCARTY 594 SINGLECUT £1,049

Taking part of its name from its scale length (24.594 inches), the PRS SE McCarty 594 is one of the few guitar brands that does 'affordable' well. Here, we get a mahogany/maple body combo and a flame maple veneer, and a mahogany neck with a rosewood fingerboard and Pattern Vintage profile. Elsewhere, it has vintage-voiced 58/15 LT 'S' humbuckers, two volumes and two tone controls (with push/pull coil-splitting), and the bridge is a two-piece design, with full intonation adjustment.
www.prsguitars.com

ESP LTD EC-1000 £1,099

The 1000 series Eclipse from LTD is a long-standing go-to for players looking for heavier tones. You get the single-cut feel and bad attitude of a Custom, but it's refined for modern styles. First, there's the slim U-shaped neck, fitted with an ebony fingerboard and 24 extra-jumbo frets. This is met by third-party hardware from TonePros, plus the all-important EMG 81 (bridge) and 60 (neck) humbuckers (a Duncan version is also available). Check out LTD's full line-up for additional finish and configuration options.
www.espguitars.com

GORDON SMITH GS2 SINGLE CUT £1,099

You don't have to look too far to find a single-cut at any budget. But what if you're after a more tailored guitar? Gordon Smith offers exactly that with a set menu of build options that factor in all elements, from body thickness and wood, to neck profile, fingerboard radius and pickup choice (such as the P-90s featured here) – and it's all helpfully laid out for you to design on its website. A base-model GS2 will set you back £1,099, which we think is a bargain for a UK-made, customisable six-string.
www.gordonsmithguitars.com

EPIPHONE KIRK HAMMETT 'GREENY' 1959 LES PAUL STANDARD £1,499

Thanks to Epiphone, you can bag a slice of tone heaven for £1,500. Expensive for an Epiphone? Maybe, but you could buy a few hundred of these for less than the price of a genuine '59. Ignore the name on the headstock – which happens to be a Gibson 'open book' shape – and does it matter if that flame is a veneer? Instead, focus on the tone from the USA Greenybuckers (magnetically out of phase, of course) and the neck that fits like a glove.
www.epiphone.com

GIBSON ORIGINAL SG SPECIAL £1,499

Wait, isn't this supposed to be about single-cuts? Well, yes, but we're making the argument that the SG is the stage- and spine-friendly alternative to a bulkier Les Paul. The Special packs a workhorse configuration into a lighter-weight format, but you still get all the tonal ingredients required. That's a mahogany body finished in nitro, a pair of P-90s with a full control set, rosewood fingerboard and vintage-style appointments. It's yours in either Ebony or Vintage Cherry.
www.gibson.com

GIBSON ORIGINAL LES PAUL SPECIAL £1,699

"And for those of you watching in black and white, the TV Yellow Les Paul is next to the Sunburst." Nothing screams 'retro' like the buttery hue of a Les Paul Special, but you don't have to pay vintage prices to own a US-made one. Blues, rock, punk, indie... if your music comes straight from the garage, then this is a staple. It's lightweight, has a clubby neck, and a throaty growl to match – all courtesy of two P-90s. It's also available in a Vintage Cherry finish.
www.gibson.com

Focused FX

The new additions to the UAFX range offer smaller-footprint, less expensive options with highly targeted applications

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

UNIVERSAL AUDIO HEAVENLY PLATE REVERB, EVERMORE STUDIO REVERB, ORION TAPE ECHO & 1176 STUDIO COMPRESSOR £199 EACH

CONTACT **Universal Audio** WEB **www.uaudio.com**

What You Need To Know

1 What's this – more UAFX pedals but smaller?
Yes, that's about the size of it. These are the first in a new compact series that each sport an individual selected effect type taken from their larger-footprint pedals.

2 What's the point in that?
Well, rather than the bells and whistles do-it-all vibe, it's a more focused approach in giving players something that they may really feel the need for at a more affordable price point.

3 Do they sound the same as those larger pedals?
Exactly the same: it's the same algorithm as found in the bigger pedal. The Orion, for example, takes the Tape EP-III program from the Starlight Echo Station to give you a pure mono tape echo pedal.

Since the first three UAFX pedals debuted in 2021, Universal Audio has used its expertise in studio equipment and software plug-ins to offer an ever-increasing range of stompboxes. Until recently, these have all followed the same form factor: large, with multiple functions, stereo operation and with software editing. Of course, that sort of technology doesn't come cheap and also the pedals may have more facilities that many potential users won't actually need. So UA has now introduced a new range of more compact pedals offering simpler operation, a standard mono signal path and a more specific function, rather than the more multi-effects nature of their bigger brothers. The Heavenly Plate Reverb and the Evermore Studio Reverb, for example, put different algorithms from the Golden Reverberator into single pedals.

All the new pedals feature the same form factor with a five-knob control surface, a three-way toggle switch for options plus a pair of rear-panel switches: one for selecting true or buffered bypass and the other offering a single function specific to a particular pedal. Each also has a USB socket for future firmware upgrades.

THE RIVALS

The UA reverb pedals are quite specific in what they do. For a more generic reverb you'll get more options from a multi-pedal such as the Boss RV-6 (£159) or TC Electronic Hall Of Fame V2 (£135). There are other Echoplex-inspired pedals around: check out the Catalinbread Belle Epoch Deluxe (£299), Dunlop EP103 Echoplex Delay (£229) and Wampler Faux Tape Echo V2 (£239).

The 1176 has direct but more expensive rivals in the Origin Effects range. The company's all-analogue recreations of the 1176 include the single-stage Cali76 Compact Deluxe (£299) and the double-stage Cali76 Stacked Edition (£345), and SlideRig Compact Deluxe Mk2 (£335).

Heavenly Plate Reverb

This pedal emulates the sound of the German-made EMT plates used in recording studios from the 1950s on. The pedal provides three different flavours of this inspiration: A is a vintage bright plate with a short decay; B is a vintage dark plate, more muted with a slightly longer decay; and C is a modern full-range plate with a nice warble on its tail.

The Decay knob sets the reverb time and Mix runs from fully dry to 100 per cent wet. There's also a useful EQ for light and shade and a PreDelay knob for putting space between your playing and the body of the reverb to get the clarity just right. Elsewhere, a Modulation knob can add dimension in the reverb trail in two ranges – Slow is like a subtle chorus, while Fast has more of a vibrato feel and can give you a more prominent effect for richly modulated 'verbs. Spring may be the reverb type most associated with the instrument due to it being built into amps, but electro-mechanical plate reverb offers deep, classy ambience that can work really well with guitar, and this pedal really nails that sound.

Evermore Studio Reverb

Besides plate, there's something about the grainy sound of early digital reverb units that sit very well with guitar tone, and the Evermore reverb is based on one of those units – the Lexicon 224 dating originally from the late 1970s and prominent on 80s recordings. Your selections here are emulations of the 224's Room, Small Hall and Large Hall programmes and key to tweaking these are the Bass, Mid and Treble knobs. These actually work on how each frequency decays in the reverb trail, adjusting the decay time for each frequency

1. Each of the pedals feature mono in and out plus two switches – one for setting the bypass mode and the other for a pedal-specific effect tweak

2. There is a USB socket on the side of each pedal that is purely for firmware updates

band, so you can really sculpt the sonic character of the ambience.

With switchable short/long PreDelay and a Modulation knob that can add a nice dusting of ear candy to your sound, this is a characterful pedal with extended tonal scope for dialling it in just right.

Orion Tape Echo

The Echoplex EP-III is *the* classic single-head tape echo, lauded not just for its delay/echo effect but also for the sound of its preamp – and the Orion is designed to deliver both. You can choose to have the preamp on or off via a rear-panel toggle switch, and if you set the Mix knob to fully dry you can use the pedal solely for that extra preamp warmth if you're not using the echo capabilities.

The three front-panel options give you the sound of brand-new tape, tape that's been a little used, and tape that's a bit more degraded on a less well-maintained machine. The Wonk knob messes things up a little more and can bring in wobbly wow and flutter – and even the sound of the tape splice passing the replay head – while a Recording Level knob emulates hotter input signals for more tape saturation, endowing the repeats with a driven texture that meshes with your guitar tone. Reflecting the flavour of a vintage Echoplex, this is an excellent delay pedal with loads of scope for adjusting the sonic character of its repeats.

Practical pedals at a decent price point, all four put the sound of quality studio gear onto your pedalboard

1176 Studio Compressor

Introduced in 1967, the Urei 1176 has been ubiquitous in recording studios and likely used on more recordings than any other compressor. Actually designed by Bill Putnam, the founding father of Universal Audio, there's a legitimate lineage right through to this new pedal iteration.

Setting up the 1176 for compression is pretty easy, starting with a choice of ratios to set the strength of the compression. In increasing amounts, you can have 4:1, 8:1, 12:1, 20:1 or 'All', which is the equivalent of engaging all four ratio buttons simultaneously on an original unit to create a massive amount of compression with some increase in harmonic distortion. You then adjust the input and output knobs and set the attack and release times of the compression.

3. Yes, you read it right – the Orion's Wonk knob is basically to make the sound get progressively 'wonky'. It adjusts tape wow, flutter and modulation, and has more impact on the sound with the Old and Worn tape settings

4. The Single option on this three-way switch is simply the sound of an 1176 compressor by itself. The other two (Dual and Sustain) are variations on the theme of having two compressors connected in series

5. Analogue tape gets worn over time, so the age of the tape in a tape echo had a direct influence on the sound. Here on the Orion, you can choose three different simulations of tape age

Besides the sound of a single standard compressor, there are two other settings offering the guitar-centric sound of two 1176s being used together, with knobs controlling multiple settings on the two compressors at the same time. Dual delivers Jimmy Page's crunch DI'ed *Black Dog* sound where one compressor was set for drive, one for compression, while Sustain nails the clean yet fully sustaining slide sound utilised by Lowell George of Little Feat. Those are the icing on the cake that make this one very versatile unit and one of the most practical compressor pedals around, especially as it's capable of a more subtle parallel compression – a mix of dry sound with compressed brought in by a rear-panel switch.

Verdict

Practical pedals at a decent price point, all four put the sound of quality studio gear onto your pedalboard. The Orion does the Echoplex thing very well, and the 1176 has all the attributes to give you a great do-it-all compressor for your 'board. The two reverb pedals also sound great and would both pass muster as generic reverb for your signal chain, but they are especially suited to players who know what they definitely want: plate sounds or vintage Lexicon stylings.

UNIVERSAL AUDIO HEAVENLY PLATE REVERB

PRICE: £199
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Digital recreation of plate reverb
FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass (Trails), 3x selectable plate reverb sounds, Decay time 500ms to 5s
CONTROLS: Decay, Mix, PreDelay, EQ, Mod, Plate switch (A/B/C), Trails/True Bypass switch, Mod Rate switch (Slow/Fast), Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, USB
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 250 mA
DIMENSIONS: 64 (w) x 118 (d) x 57mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

UNIVERSAL AUDIO EVERMORE STUDIO REVERB

PRICE: £199
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Digital recreation of reverb from a Lexicon 224, 3x selectable reverbs
FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass (Trails)
CONTROLS: Mod, Mix, Bass, Mid, Treble, Room/Sm Hall/Lg Hall switch, Trails/True Bypass switch, PreDelay Off/On switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, USB
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 250 mA
DIMENSIONS: 64 (w) x 118 (d) x 57mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

UNIVERSAL AUDIO ORION TAPE ECHO

PRICE: £199
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Digital recreation of Echoplex tape echo
FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass (trails), 80-700ms delay time, switchable preamp
CONTROLS: Delay, Mix, Feedback, Wonk, Rec Level, Mint/Worn/Old switch, Trails/True Bypass switch, Preamp Off/On switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, USB
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 250 mA
DIMENSIONS: 64 (w) x 118 (d) x 57mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

UNIVERSAL AUDIO 1176 STUDIO COMPRESSOR

PRICE: £199
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Digital recreation of an 1176 compressor
FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass, single and stacked compressor modes, selectable parallel compression
CONTROLS: Input, Output, Attack, Release, Ratio, Single/Dual/Sustain switch, Buffer/True Bypass switch, Parallel Off/On switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, USB
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 250 mA
DIMENSIONS: 64 (w) x 118 (d) x 57mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Compact size; simple operation; excellent sound quality; clearly defined roles

CONS Some players may prefer the bells and whistles do-it-all vibe of the larger format

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BLUEPRINT

KICK LIKE A MULE

When Ida Mae guitarist Chris Turpin found his traditional 12-string resonator was getting too cumbersome to tour with, Matt Eich of Michigan's Mule Resophonic Guitars came up with an innovative yet charismatically retro alternative

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

Resonator guitars occupy an unusual place in guitar mythology. Nearly all players find them attractive as iconic designs – and it's hardly a surprise as they not only conjure up the world of pre-war Delta Blues but also troubadours of the rock era such as Rory Gallagher. Despite this allure, however, they are often pigeonholed as niche instruments that are only good for playing slide on. Thus, though they occupy a hallowed place in our imaginations, they're much less often found in the average player's guitar collection than flat-top acoustics.

This is rather a shame as a good resonator can work so well for fingerpicking – as in Mark Knopfler's intro to the Dire Straits track *Romeo And Juliet*. And that's something not lost on a newer, post-White Stripes generation of guitarists who have drawn on the folk, blues and roots music of America to carve out a latter-day take on the gutsy, emotive blues recordings of the 30s. For such players, a resonator is not a quaint antique but a powerfully expressive instrument with a punch, resonance and percussiveness that commands attention.

One such artist is Chris Turpin of the band Ida Mae. Drawing upon deep musical roots in blues, folk and country, the band's new album, *Thunder Above You*, is somehow powerfully contemporary yet as authentic and soulful as any Memphis-waxed 45. And a key component of that sound is Chris's use of resonator guitars, brought up to date by the progressive design and hand-crafted features of his Mule Resophonic Guitars 'Mavis' model thinline resonators in both six- and, more recently, a 12-string version. Chris joins us to explain why he feels that, with shrewd design updates, resonators deserve a renaissance and that Mule guitars lead the way in offering modern players vibey old sounds in a guitar built for the modern stage.

Matt Eich, founder of Mule Resophonic Guitars. His work blends pre-war styling cues with innovative design

"I've had a love affair with resonators since forever," Chris explains. "It started through [listening to] the folkies and going to Norwich Arts Centre and watching people like Bert Jansch and Martin Simpson play slide, and when there were a couple of bluesers that would come through and they would play resonators, I was just like 'Ah, what is that?' Then, of course, I eventually stumbled upon Rory Gallagher playing *Pistol Slapper Blues* and I kind of fell into the blues and folk through Zeppelin and The White Stripes and all of that when I was about 14 or 15.

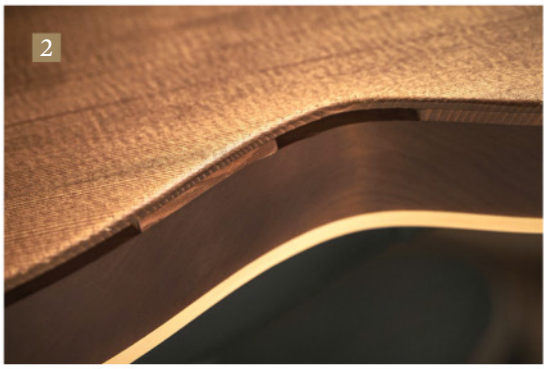
"So when I had the money, almost had the money – when we started our band... it may have been when we got the advance from Decca, who we were signed to at the time – there was a New Year's Day sale on Denmark Street in one of the shops there. I went down and picked up my first National and I just loved it. But having toured with them so much and getting a little older, they're quite heavy. They're weighty instruments! When Instagram first started, I think I was one of the only young people really playing a resonator."

PHOTO COURTESY OF MULE RESOPHONIC GUITARS

"I've had a love affair with resonators since forever… Eventually I stumbled upon Rory Gallagher playing 'Pistol Slapper Blues'"

Chris Turpin

Chris Turpin of Ida Mae with the unique thinline 12-string made for him by Matt Eich of Mule Resophonic Guitars



1. Matt Eich makes heavy use of roasted woods in the build of his Mavis model – for stability and for the aroma!

2. Small slot-like ports on the side of the body aid unplugged volume

3. Matt Eich's guitars abound with elegant styling touches such as this 'M' motif precision-cut into the tailpiece of the 12-string

Heavy Metal

Chris says that he found fresh inspiration in the upfront, almost brash sound of traditional resonators – but also their ability to be played with breathy delicacy when you back off with your right hand. The only trouble was, metal-bodied Nationals and the like, while vibey and potent sonically, are heavy beasts that are sometimes troublesome to play loud and amplified when drive pedals are kicking the amp into an ecstatic howl. This problem was especially trying for Chris as he really loves playing 12-string resonators, so redolent of Lead Belly's blues sound but even heavier to wield on stage and yet more complex in timbre than a standard resonator.

"I got a few followers from the fact people were interested in [my use of resonators]," Chris continues. "But then I saw this company 'Mule Resophonic Guitars' pop up [in my feed] probably close to 10 years ago. I can remember – before we'd done anything as Ida Mae [Chris's previous band was Kill It Kid] – I messaged Matt at Mule saying, 'Hey, do you make resonators? Are they any lighter than the standard fare?' And he said 'no' [laughs]. And that was the end of that.

"So I carried on working with National and playing my 12-string until he came out with this Mavis guitar. I've seen various versions of smaller-bodied resonators and semi-acoustic resonators that I hadn't really bonded with; there's something about a resonator that has to be big and chunky and have some weight. So he came up with this Mavis, which has that width of an acoustic guitar and I said, 'Hey, I think I need to try one of these' – and that's how we got talking and he put together that guitar with a microphone in it, which he'd only done once before... I took it on the road and fell in love with it. And my lower back fell in love with it! And so me and Matt got talking."

Making Mavis

Here, Matt Eich, Mule Resophonic Guitars' founder, takes up the story. The Michigan-based luthier explains that his interest in guitars began when he took up playing the instrument himself, but he found his true calling after attending the Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery. His design philosophy couldn't be further from the kind of 'jewellery maker' approach to guitars that

> "The 12-string was inspired by a player, just like the original Mule tricones were"
>
> ***Matt Eich***

is sometimes associated with small-volume luthiers. While all of his instruments are laden with antique-feeling features and hand-crafted styling details, Matt says he wants his guitars to be played without any tip-toeing around; he wants players to connect with them as hard-working tools before they even get as far as admiring them as the beautiful pieces of lutherie they are. His six-string Mavis model, fitted with a mini-humbucker at the neck and an internal microphone, was just the kind of rugged but expressive tool-instrument that fitted a player such as Chris perfectly.

"The Mavis guitar is a solidbody guitar," Matt explains. "The back of it is roasted basswood and the top is roasted maple and the neck is roasted maple. All that wood we

get from American Specialty Hardwoods here in Michigan, so all of our wood except the ebony fingerboards comes from them. I use roasted maple because it's stable and it's got a really beautiful colour that takes a stain really well and when you cut it, it smells like barbecue – which is one of my favourite things [laughs]. It also makes them lighter and when you're talking about making a resonator guitar that definitely helps. I forget what they weigh off the top of my head, but I think it's like 6.5lb or 7lb or something like that. So that's what they're made out of."

Hard Working Mules

Though driven by the aforementioned a desire to make hard-working tools for musicians, Matt is far from being a slouch aesthetically and the first Mavis he sent to Chris features a beautifully aged-looking tortoiseshell pickguard, vintage-looking purfling and a charming inlay of a mule at the crown of the headstock. Combined with its progressive features, the resulting guitar has the soul of an 80-year-old instrument but the handling of a modern electric. However, witnessing Chris playing the six-string version of the Mavis almost instantly convinced Matt that he should design an all-new 12-string version to go with it.

> "I use roasted maple because it's stable, light and has a beautiful colour"
>
> ***Matt Eich***

"When we got Chris that Mavis and seeing what he did on it, it was so exciting, especially his video for Carter Vintage [the prominent US vintage guitar retailer]," Matt explains. "I'm not sure if he then asked again about a Mavis 12-string, or what the catalyst was, but whoever it was who asked, it was just like, 'Yes, absolutely, it *must* happen.' You know, whatever we have to do to hear what Chris could do... what he could find in a 12-string with a semi-solid body. I don't want to say he was the only man for the job. But it was really kind of inspired by his ability... and that irreverence, where it was just like, 'I just need a tool, man – I'm gonna throw it in the dirt, I'm gonna do what I need to do with it. It doesn't really matter.' You know, it doesn't have to be something in particular, he's going to be able to find something cool in it. And so that's how the 12-string Mavis came about. It was inspired by a player, just like the original Mule tricone resonators were [inspired by] listening to Kelly Joe Phelps

The first resonator that Chris Turpin bought from Matt Eich is this beautiful Mavis model with both an internal mic and a mini-humbucker

4. Chris with the red S-type metal hollowbody electric that Matt Eich built for himself but was persuaded to let Chris have!

5. Matt Eich says that his self-wound mini-humbuckers work well across his range of guitars

6. Faint echoes of early 60s Fender are blended with an older, rawer vibe on this one-off guitar

until I was like, 'You know, I need to make this tool,' and then seeing Chris play was like, 'I need to make this tool.'

Matt was more or less new to making 12-string resonators, which spurred him to be open-minded and innovative in his approach to designing the guitar. Though its body would be little deeper than that of a standard Telecaster or similar, Matt and Chris wanted the 12-string to have a direct, punch-in-the-gut resonant connection to the player. And, to that end, Matt decided to fit what was effectively a soundboard on the back of the guitar. Unlike a flat-top acoustic guitar, the 12-string Mavis didn't need to produce hi-fi quality acoustic performance, but it did need to have a bold, resonant character when unplugged.

"Yeah, he wanted to put a resonating backplate on it," Chris explains. "So it has a spruce top on the back of the guitar and you get a lot of acoustic volume out of it. And that really resonates and moves and you feel the whole guitar shaking as you're playing it, especially when you run it through an amp like I have been with overdrive at volume – the whole thing becomes an alive experience. That's the main thing he's done, then the volume of tones are in a different place to where they were on the [six-string] Mavis. Also, the neck profile was chunkier. I said, 'I've played old Stellas and stuff – I can deal with a big neck. Do whatever you think [works best].' The neck also has quite a decent break angle on it so there's quite a lot of snap to the notes. Some 12-strings can feel a little lacklustre and elastic-bandy, but this doesn't feel that way," Chris adds.

Live & Loud

The final piece of the puzzle was to find the right way to amplify it. Matt says the 12-string's inherently bold unplugged sound makes it great for writing and noodling on at home, but, above all else, the guitar had to perform reliably well when amplified on stage. Chris Turpin was able to offer his insights from life on tour and, in the end, both designer and player agreed that magnetic pickups offered the best balance of sonic performance and rugged simplicity. Handily, Matt winds his own pickups and his mini-humbuckers have proven the perfect choice for the 12-string Mavis and other resonators.

> "Matt winds his own incredible mini-humbuckers, which have a very unique sound" ***Chris Turpin***

"I've messed with lots of different pickups in resonators over the years and I think all of them are somewhat of a terrible compromise, whichever route you go down," Chris Turpin laughs. "And trust me, I have tried every different type and people say 'this, this and this' and 'this preamp system' and none of this has worked for me other than the Hot-Plate pickup that National use, which is just a Tele-style pickup or a P-90 in the one I have. So [for me, the best solution is] just a magnetic pickup into the amp.

"Matt winds his own incredible mini-humbuckers, which have a very unique sound because I'm not a fan of mini-

humbuckers in general. I'm not sure what he does to his that makes them so special, but that's why we're using them on the 12-string. But the microphone pickup [on my six-string Mavis] is a really interesting addition because it allows so much more detail of your right hand to come out when you're *not* playing with overdrive or at volume."

This flexible character gives Chris's six-string Mavis model a broad utility that is a far cry from the stereotyped image of the resonator as a blues-and-slide only instrument. However, Matt Eich says he has a possibly controversial opinion to share about the best pickup systems to use for acoustic guitars.

"When you plug in a guitar, whether it's got a spruce top and Brazilian back and sides, or it's a mahogany solidbody guitar, if you put a pickup on it and you put it into an amp or a PA, it is now an electric guitar," Matt argues, with a wry smile. "When you plug our tricone resonator with a mini-humbucker into an amp, it sounds like that tricone coming out of the amp. When you plug in a Mavis with a mini-humbucker into an amp, the Mavis does not sound anything like the tricone amplified, except that you

> "I let those electric guitar pickups be the great solution that they are"
>
> ***Matt Eich***

can tell it's a resonator guitar. And so my approach to [amplifying] those guitars was [to embrace the idea that] the electric guitar pickup offers the best balance between getting volume without feedback but also representing the sound of the instrument. Now, a mini-humbucker fitted to a resonator is not going to sound like a mini-humbucker on a Les Paul – and I tried all the different types of pickups on these guitars when I was making them. For example, fitted to a resonator, a PAF does not sound like it would on a normal electric guitar.

"So I discovered that some pickups gave you too much of something and too little of something else – but the mini-humbuckers seemed to offer the best balance and [faithful] representation of that particular instrument. So I think my approach to that is letting those electric guitar pickups be the great solution that they are. In my opinion, the problem of amplifying acoustic instruments was solved with the invention of the [magnetic] electric guitar pickup," he concludes with a mischievous grin. G

www.muleresophonic.com/
https://idamaemusic.com

There's a jagged, junkyard mojo to this (in fact) beautifully crafted metal-body S-style electric

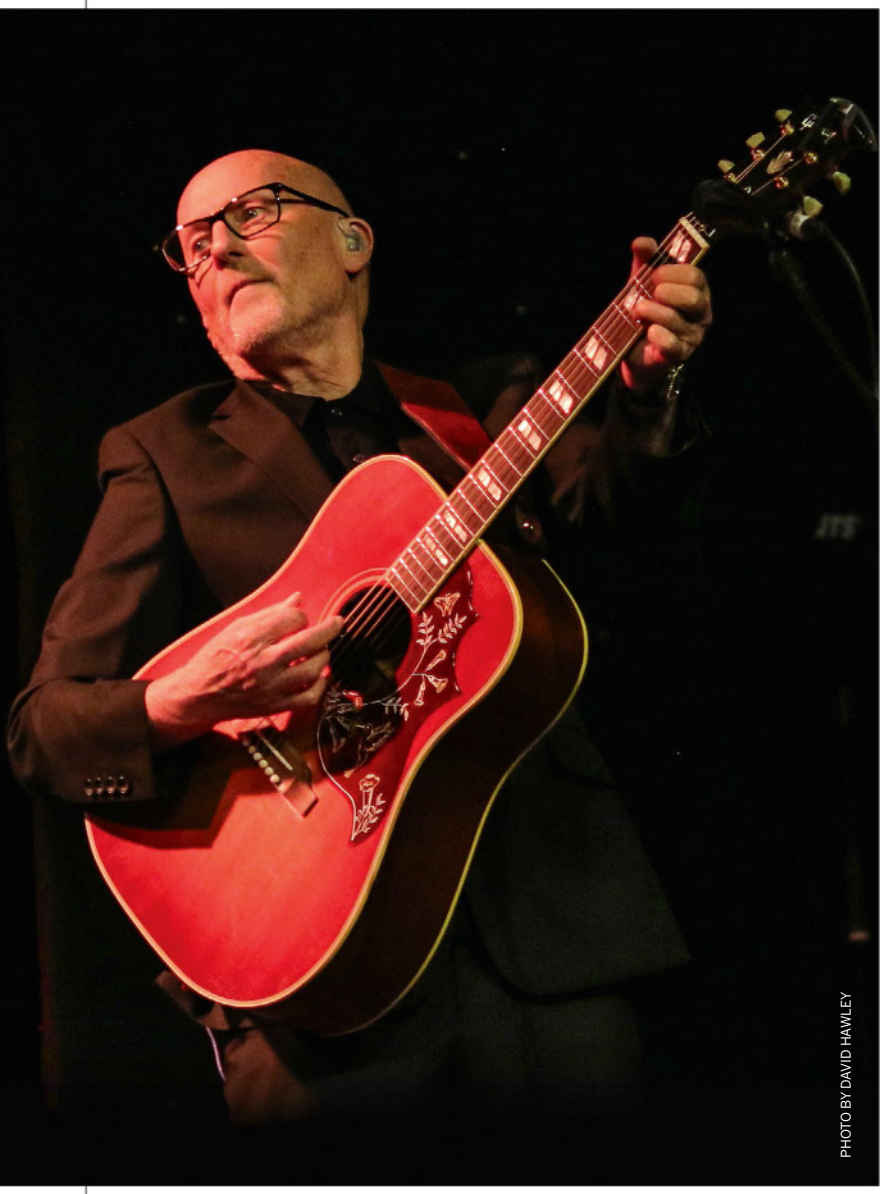
BOUGHT & SOLD

NEVILLE MARTEN

This issue, *Guitarist's* very own GASman fesses up about the gear he's loved (and lost) during his long and illustrious gigging life

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"In 1970 I worked in a corrugated-cardboard factory in Chelmsford as a machine setter/operator. I didn't smoke, drink or take drugs and, since I earned good money, I saved up every week. When I had enough cash, I went to Guitar Village in Shaftesbury Avenue in London and bought a 1967 stripped-body Telecaster. For £105. I painted it black with Humbrol enamel! But it was an amazing guitar. Sadly, I sold it to get a white Strat, which wasn't a patch on that lovely Tele."



Both acoustics and electrics play a key role in Neville's live performances with rock 'n' roll legend Marty Wilde – this Hummingbird is from Gibson's Custom Shop

PHOTO BY DAVID HAWLEY

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"In 1989, I spec'd a PRS Signature directly from Paul, to my exact requirements. It was a hand-signed, limited edition of 1,000 with Brazilian 'board and 10 top, and was my main guitar for years. However, I sold it a while back, but having lately been ruminating on the idea of another PRS, I bought a limited-edition River Blue maple-necked Custom 24 with Wood Library spec. It's an incredibly striking-looking guitar, spectacularly built, and will cover just about anything you throw at it."

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've had when buying gear?

"I don't think I've ever really had one. But in 1972 I bought a black Les Paul Custom. I knew the head of the guitar repair department at Selmer's in Braintree and he got it for me on the staff purchase scheme. It wasn't a great guitar as it had silly 'Fretless Wonder' mandolin-sized frets. So I took it round the London music shops in an attempt to flog it. After having no success all day, a guy at the final store I tried said he'd swap it for his own two Fender Teles. So I went to his flat and did the deal. Both were sunburst with maple necks, and one was a '68 with slab maple 'board. That felt like a good deal."

"I bought a Strat and two guys in suits turned up with it. Hendrix management? Who knows…"

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've experienced?

"Actually that LP Custom would be a good fit here, as I was so looking forward to getting it and when it arrived it was a complete disappointment. But I'll offer a few other instances instead. In the early 70s the amp I used was my mate's 1963 Vox AC30. But, of course, I needed one of my own and thought I'd get the best. So I saved up and bought my friend's Fender Dual Showman Reverb head for £165. It was a hell of a lot back then. I then went bonkers and bought, from Sound City in London, the matching Fender cabinet but with two 15-inch JBL speakers. It was £303 and I bought it on hire purchase. With my weak-toned Strat, no master volume control or overdrive pedal, it was a disaster. Oh, to have that head now, though!

"In another moment of madness I swapped my consecutive serial number John Cruz Master Built Strat and Tele for an ES-335 with P-90s. Fool! They were both three-tone sunburst with rosewood fingerboards and were amazing. The 335 lasted about three months."

NEVILLE'S GO-TO RIG

"For theatre shows it's my '56 John Cruz Master Design Strat with Bare Knuckle Trilogy Suite pickups, into a Blackstar Amped 2 pedal with ACS Custom in-ear monitors. I also play a Gibson Custom Shop 1960 Hummingbird with LR Baggs Anthem pickup; that's DI'd with a Boss Waza Craft tuner that doubles as a mute pedal. But I also recently did a charity show with a borrowed cream-Tolex Fender Tone Master Deluxe Reverb. Into that went my red Custom Shop Strat via my Dan Steinhardt-built pedalboard. Although it's got tons of other stuff on it, I just used the TC Electronic PolyTune, Fulltone OCD distortion, Strymon Flint reverb and Volante delay, plus a Providence Anadime chorus."

A longtime fan of John Cruz's work with Fender, Nev uses a '56 John Cruz Master Design Strat on stage, loaded with Bare Knuckle's "P-90-esque" Trilogy Suite pickups

PHOTO BY DAVID HAWLEY

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"For purely financial reasons, it's my (almost certainly) ex-Hendrix white Strat. It was the one that I sold my '67 Tele for, and had been put together from two or three guitars. I've always called it the runt of the litter. It had a late-50s slab-'board rosewood neck, 1967 body and different year pickups. It had a button on the lower horn and the nut was loose in its slot, so it had obviously been used upside down. I bought it from the *Melody Maker* ads and two short-haired guys in suits turned up with it. JHE management? I knew it wasn't Chas Chandler, but I wouldn't have known Mike Jeffery from Adam. So, who knows?"

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"Leave your wallet at home! Seriously, though, don't go for outlandish colours or you'll regret it later, stick with the classics. And make sure you love the look of the thing – check yourself out in a mirror with it! – as almost everything else, pickups, bridge, action and so on, can be changed or upgraded."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window (or browsed online) and what were you looking at?

"Actually, it was yesterday when I perused Vintage 'N' Rare Guitars' window in Bath. I wasn't specifically looking for anything, but a lovely Gretsch 6120 caught my eye, as did a black Rickenbacker 330. Glancing through to the back wall I spied lots of Les Pauls hanging up, so I may nip in to see them soon."

If forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp, or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"Given how often you plug into an amplifier in anger, and the quality of the digital stuff available now, it would be the guitar. You can't exactly cradle a Marshall half-stack on the sofa, but I can with my lovely Tom Murphy Aged (not Murphy Lab) '56 Les Paul Goldtop."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"The clever bugger in me would like to say P-90s, as they are the best of both worlds in so many ways. But it would have to be a stock three-single-coil Strat, as it's the most versatile pickup array there is in my view." **[DM]**

The Blues Headlines by Neville Marten's Blues Collective is available now on Amazon Music and Apple Music, and on CD via www.thatpedalshowstore.com

The MOD SQUAD

TIME WARP TALES

When do your modding adventures turn into your first self-build guitar? Dave Burrluck goes back to the 70s to revisit his early guitar-making past. Flares are a necessity…

As we've documented before in The Mod Squad, building a guitar today is pretty simple. Buy a kit from StewMac and, with a few basic tools and some of that modding knowledge you've accrued, you can build your own T, S or J-style on your living-room table. Ha!

But turn the clock back five decades and things were rather different. Aside from the obvious 'what did we do before the internet?' issue, guitar kits didn't exist and getting any information on guitar making, especially of the electric variety, wasn't easy. Why bother? Well, my adventures started after I'd asked my dad if he'd loan me the money to buy an electric guitar from the Bell Musical Instrument catalogue. He replied, 'No, but why don't we make one?' He even found some plans in a woodworking magazine and, although far from refined, said guitar (which weighed a ton) sort of worked.

> "I was listening to Keith whacking his 'Plexi'. This was a rock 'n' roll tool: a modernist creation"

I was lucky. My dad had a small workshop filled with his (and his father's) hand tools. From a pretty young age I'd shape scrap wood into all sorts of things. As I got older I learned how to use saws and planes, and how to accurately mark and join wood. By the time I'd started to learn the guitar in my mid-teens I realised that the solidbody electric guitar, for the most part, was a pretty easy bit of wood craft. However, getting access to the non-wood parts – such as fretwire, machineheads, bridges, pickups and potentiometers – was more of a stumbling block.

First Steps

But it wasn't just guitar making I was attracted to, it was original design. I have no idea where that came from, but I can remember drawing up some pretty exotic 'designs' on the dinner table. This was helped by the fact that my dad, a civil engineer, had a large board, T-square and all sorts of drawing accessories, such as a set of French curves, protracting pencils and – importantly – rubbers.

The first new guitar design that I still vividly recall being on my radar was Dan Armstrong's see-through Plexiglas guitar. I can't remember where I saw it first, but there was Keith Richards on *Top Of The Pops* in 1971 banging out *Brown Sugar* on a 'Plexi'. Later that year, there was Ronnie Wood with the Faces, playing *Stay With Me* with its gloriously catchy and scratchy slide solos. What was this otherworldly creation?

Meanwhile, me and my bass-playing mate would skive off school and spend days listening to The Stones' *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out*. I didn't know then that I was listening to Keith whacking his 'Plexi'. This was a rock 'n' roll tool, no question: a modernist creation. Was Dan Armstrong an alien?

Today, type a few key words into Google and you'll have all the info you need. Back in the early 70s you had to do your research and then some, poring over *Beat Instrumental* magazine and *Melody Maker*. Over months, probably more, I pieced together the story, but I had already started designing (in my head) my own 'Plexi'. I even found a source for clear acrylic, but that was going to cost and I then had to cut and shape it – I figured I'd need a machine or two for that and my dad's workshop wasn't up to the task.

Another problem was that I didn't have access to a real 'Plexi' to draw around. My dad, however, showed me how to scale up a drawing from a picture (probably in *Melody Maker*) of Ronnie Wood with his 'Plexi'. Having subsequently played a few 'Plexis', I got close. But, frankly, that was the least of my problems.

The neck was partially made as supplied, although the headstock outline (sorry Gibson!) had to be hand-cut and it has a black Formica facing

A zero fret meant cutting accurate nut slots wasn't necessary and the string guide is fabricated from rosewood. The 'edge binding' is, ahem, painted on

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

Inspired by Dan Armstrong, this 50-year-old self-build uses a semi-solid construction with a centre spline, an obeche frame and hardwood facings, front and back. It weighs 2.52kg (5.54lb); the body depth is 36mm. The scratchplate was hand-cut from what appears to be black Perspex

This maple fingerboard (an offcut from a violin or viola back) has a subtle flame. The fret positions were marked, then the slots cut by hand. When calculated with the 'rule of 18', the scale length of 629mm (24.75 inches) is actually the 'old Gibson' scale

Learning The Craft

We didn't have slabs of wood just lying around that were large enough to make a solidbody guitar. But my dad did have a couple of pieces of very lightweight obeche, though not quite thick enough for a body. From somewhere I got the idea of using those as a frame – I cut out the middle and stuck them to a centre block. Then I faced the back and front with some thinner hardwood boards, something like meranti that you could buy from any DIY hardware shop. It was quite Danelectro-like, although I'm pretty sure I didn't know that back then. I'd always thought I got the idea from Donald Brosnac's *The Electric Guitar: Its History And Construction*, but my well-thumbed copy is dated 1976 and the guitar was definitely used in 1973/'74 (for the slide guitar parts on a demo that we then hawked around London record companies). And I definitely used it on a TV appearance in 1975. But that's another story...

> "An off-cut, probably from a maple violin back, was press-ganged into service as a fingerboard"

The neck, not to mention the mythical truss rod, was another leap. But as my dad's passion for classical music and craft had combined into a lifelong interest in violin-making, he used a company, Sydney Evans Ltd, based in Birmingham, to source woods and parts. They also offered partly crafted maple necks (with a truss rod installed) for 'plectrum' guitars – all you had to do was taper and shape the neck and cut a headstock shape, certainly doable by hand.

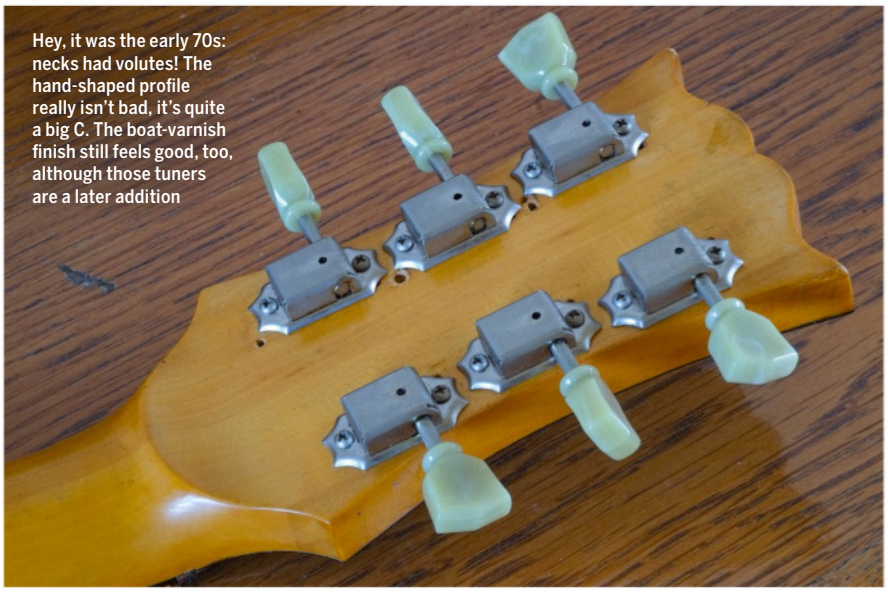
An off-cut, probably from a maple violin (or viola) back, was press-ganged into service as a fingerboard. I think I used a book that was certainly available by 1971, *The Classical Guitar: Design And Construction* by Donald McLeod and Robert Welford, to calculate and mark out the fret positions using the 'rule of 18'. What could go wrong?

Parts & Finishing

Back to Dan Armstrong. I'd seen that he'd abandoned the plastic 'Plexi', moved to the UK and, from 1971, was now making wooden-body guitars with a sliding pickup – outrageous! – and a rather neat-looking wrapover bridge. That was what I wanted. I don't think I'd seen a Leo Quan Badass bridge, which I certainly used for later builds, so the task of creating our own wrapover fell to one of my dad's friends, Bill, a local metal-working engineer.

Presumably back on the drawing board, I drew out a design – at least my technical drawing classes at school had some use – and Bill got to work. The result? Well, it's rather chunky and not the easiest to adjust, but it worked and, made from aluminium, is not as daft as it looked. Inadvertently, I'd invented the PRS Stoptail bridge, 20 years before Paul Reed Smith!

Finishing the guitar was to prove equally challenging. All the electric guitars I'd seen, not least the Les Paul, then SG copies I owned, had what I understood to be a sprayed-on, smooth gloss finish. Presumably aerosol spray paints were available and why I didn't use those I have



Hey, it was the early 70s: necks had volutes! The hand-shaped profile really isn't bad, it's quite a big C. The boat-varnish finish still feels good, too, although those tuners are a later addition

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE BURRLUCK

no idea. I certainly had no access to a spray gun. Instead, I painted my wooden 'Plexi' with some black paint, then some clear varnish, which (when fully dry) I cut back with some fine glass paper. I then smoothly hand-rubbed the surface with some pumice powder mixed with a light oil that my dad used to finish off his violin builds. It was smooth-ish and, after a lot of final rubbing with a furniture polish, looked like a glossy sprayed-on finish – at least from a distance.

Having a mate (the leader of the Uriah Heep-inspired band I played in) who worked in a music shop that primarily sold home organs proved a boon – I'm pretty sure that shop was where I bought a set of cheap machineheads and a humbucking pickup of Japanese origin. A nearby television repair shop then received a visit from a long-haired 'hippie' who was duly dispatched with a pair of potentiometers...

Final Thoughts

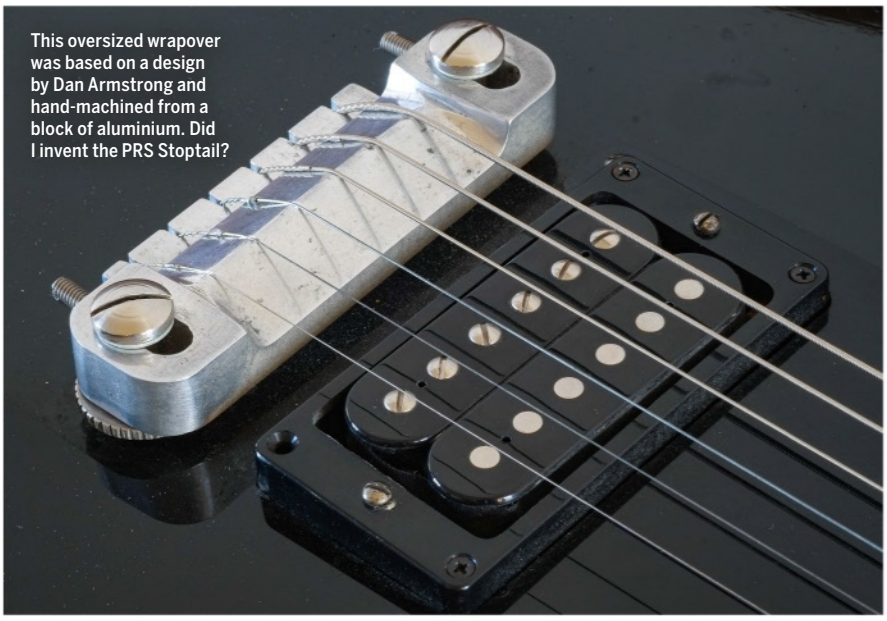
Despite all this effort, the guitar only got limited use before it was sold on to pay for my next build. It went to a local guitarist who used it for some years, and when I bumped into him a couple of decades later he said he still had the guitar but didn't use it any more. A deal was done to swap it back for an Ovation steel-string electro. He also apologised for changing the pickup, which, when I went about

> "Having a mate who worked in a music shop that primarily sold home organs proved a boon"

renovating the guitar, I found to be an early Gibson T-Top that I've subsequently used on numerous guitars.

I certainly wasn't the only one mucking around with guitars back then. In parallel, a young Paul Reed Smith was doing the same thing, beginning with a bass that he made in school. Mind you, my favourite example remains the slightly older Ted Newman Jones III. Researching his story for a future article – and to cut a long story short – he made his first electric guitar for a certain Keith Richards, a non-cutaway five-string, which was first used in public with The Stones on 18 January 1973, in Los Angeles, at a Nicaragua benefit concert. I can't beat that!

But what about you? Did you ever make a guitar in the glory days before kits and partscasters? Guitars – good or bad – have stories. What's yours? G



This oversized wrapover was based on a design by Dan Armstrong and hand-machined from a block of aluminium. Did I invent the PRS Stoptail?

The over-long intonation adjustment screws are small diameter bolts with a single slot cut into the end for a blade screwdriver. Overall, it's not easy to adjust, though

This curved heel was quite an advanced design for the times. The neck is held with bolts that screw into recessed bolts under the fingerboard – not dissimilar to that Dan Armstrong Plexi

Huw Price's
Nitty Gritty

Every guitar sound – whether on vinyl or Spotify – has been compressed. Let's find out why

Compression

In very simple terms, compressors are like automatic volume controls that kick in when the input signal exceeds a preset level. Then, once the input level has fallen back below that threshold level, the compressor resets itself and ceases to have any effect on the sound. Depending on the sophistication or design of the compressor itself, users may be able to set the level at which the compressor is activated, the speed of response, the speed at which it resets, and the overall output level of the compressor itself. We'll explore those controls in more detail later, but first let's discuss the origins of electronic compression.

Narrow View

For our purposes, dynamic range can be defined as the difference between the quietest and loudest parts of a musical performance. This caused technical challenges during the analogue audio era, when recordings were made direct to disk or onto magnetic tape. Both formats have a noise floor that can be audible when music is at its quietest, and, in extreme cases, disc surface noise and tape hiss can obscure the music. At the top end of the dynamic range, the input signal can exceed the capabilities of the recording media and induce unpleasant distortion.

Dynamic range is a key component of musical expression, but even so, audio engineers soon realised that a method of narrowing dynamic range was needed in order to make viable recordings. Audio compressors were originally designed to overcome technical issues, rather than enhance the sound or create musical effects. Having a compressor on hand to control the loudest passages allowed recording engineers to print quieter passages at a higher level than was previously possible. This improved the signal-to-noise ratio, which effectively masked tape hiss in addition to reducing the risk of distortion.

> Audio compressors were designed to overcome technical issues, rather than enhance sound

You could argue that the theoretical ideal would be complete audio transparency, with the compressor imperceptibly controlling the dynamics while imparting no sonic character. But in reality, many compressors have strong sonic characteristics – and that's what we love about them.

Whichever compressor you choose, these units can help bring a smoother sound to picked single notes and are a must for country players

COMPRESSOR CONTROLS

Depending on the manufacturer and the type of compressor, the number of controls, and their labelling, will vary across the spectrum, but hopefully the following guide will cover most options.

THRESHOLD/COMPRESSION/SUSTAIN/INPUT: This sets the level at which the compression is activated. Turning this control up will lower the threshold and the compressor will engage at lower input signal levels.

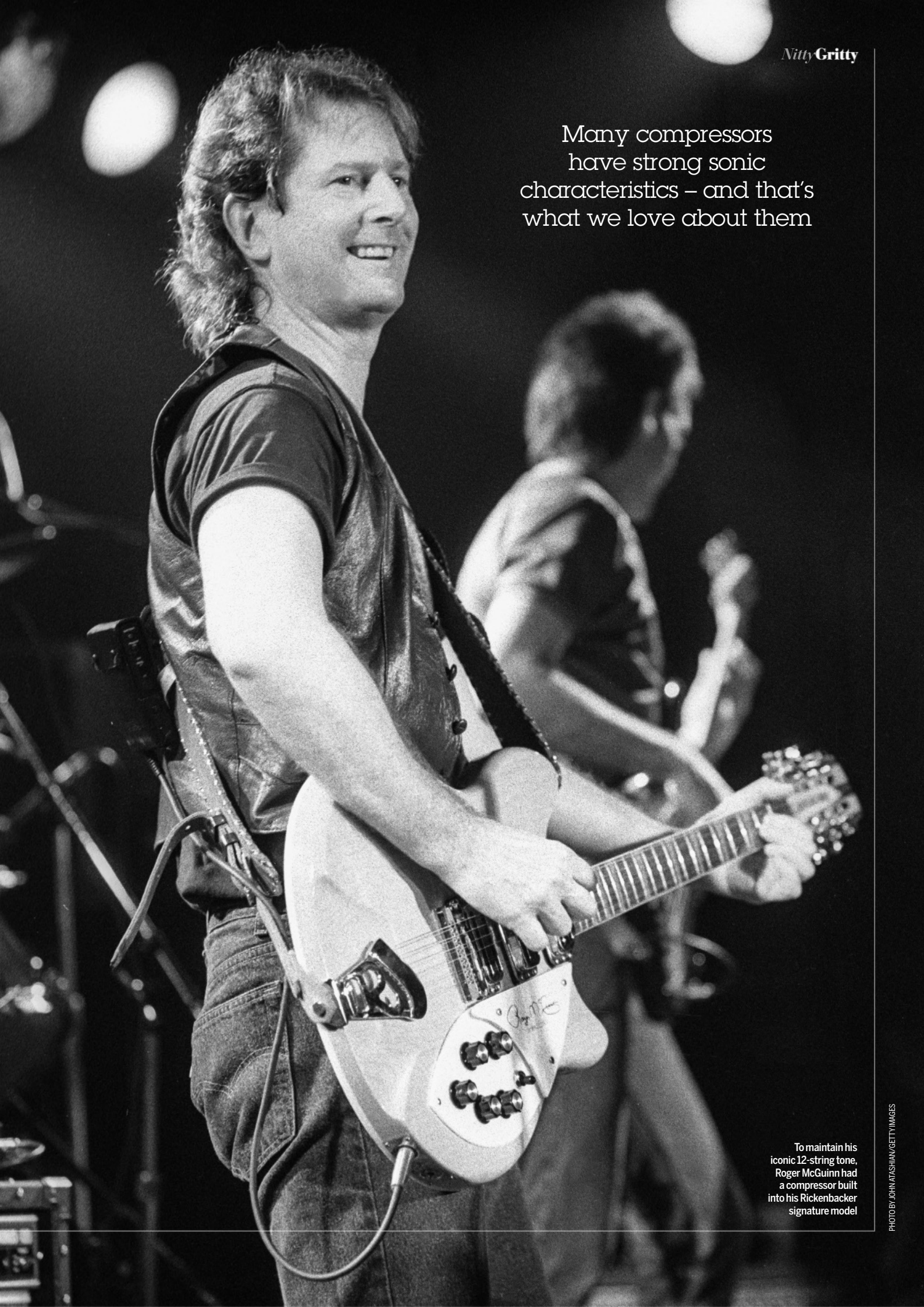
RATIO: With a 2:1 ratio, a 2dB increase in input level is needed for the output level to increase by 1dB. A 20:1 ratio requires a 20dB increase in input for 1dB of extra output. It's all about compression strength.

ATTACK & RELEASE: Attack sets the compressor's response speed when the input exceeds the threshold. Meanwhile, Release determines the rate at which it resets after the input drops below the threshold.

MAKE UP/GAIN/LEVEL/OUTPUT: Heavy compression may reduce overall signal level and this control will compensate for the level drop or even provide a boost.

MIX: Mix allows you to blend the compressed and uncompressed signals. This is very rarely seen on studio compressors and is more likely to be available on pedals.

HARD/SOFT KNEE: Most commonly seen on studio compressors, a Hard Knee setting applies full-strength compression as soon as the input signal crosses the threshold. A Soft Knee setting, on the other hand, begins by adding gentle compression before the input signal reaches threshold level, and compression strength gradually increases as the input signal reaches and then exceeds the threshold.



Many compressors have strong sonic characteristics – and that's what we love about them

To maintain his iconic 12-string tone, Roger McGuinn had a compressor built into his Rickenbacker signature model

PHOTO BY JOHN ATASHIAN/GETTY IMAGES

1. In the 60s, compressors such as this Fairchild unit were the preserve of studios like Abbey Road

2. Universal Audio's Teletronix LA-2A plug-in emulates the almost 60-year-old Leveling Amplifier

COMPRESSION TYPES

As electronic technology evolved and new components were developed, engineers devised various ways to achieve compression. Here are the main types.

VARI-MU: The split input signal forms a side chain to provide a control voltage. This voltage constantly rebiases a valve in the signal path to adjust gain. The Fairchild 660 and 670 are the most revered versions, and plug-in emulations are available.

OPTICAL: An input signal side-chain is routed to a bulb or LED that's adjacent to a photoresistor. As it glows brighter with higher signal levels, it increases the resistance of the photoresistor so it operates like a light-driven volume potentiometer. Check out Teletronix LA-2A type plug-ins and the PRS Mary Cries pedal.

FET: During the late 60s it was found that Field Effect Transistors (FETs) could be used as voltage variable resistors. Voltage derived from the input signal applied to the FET's gate alters the resistance between the source and drain. Plug-in versions are usually based on the Urei 1176; the Origin Effects Cali76 is a stompbox equivalent, as well as the new UAFX 1176 Studio Compressor, reviewed on page 102.

VCA: Voltage Controlled Amplifier compressors can provide very fast attack and release times and were hugely popular for 1980s pop productions. The SSL mix bus and DBX 160 are classic VCA compressors, and the Boss CS-3 is a VCA compressor pedal.

OTA : Operational Transconductance Amplifier compressors operate similarly to VCA compressors but a chip generates variable current, rather than voltage. In pedal form, the Ross Compressor is a classic and the Xotic SP is a more versatile modern version.

Compression Effect

Back in the 1960s, audio engineering staff at studios such as Abbey Road were notoriously protective of their Fairchild and Altec compressors, and studio management made clients book them in advance. These classically trained recordists were no doubt concerned that scruffy, long-haired types might abuse the equipment by pushing it beyond its design parameters.

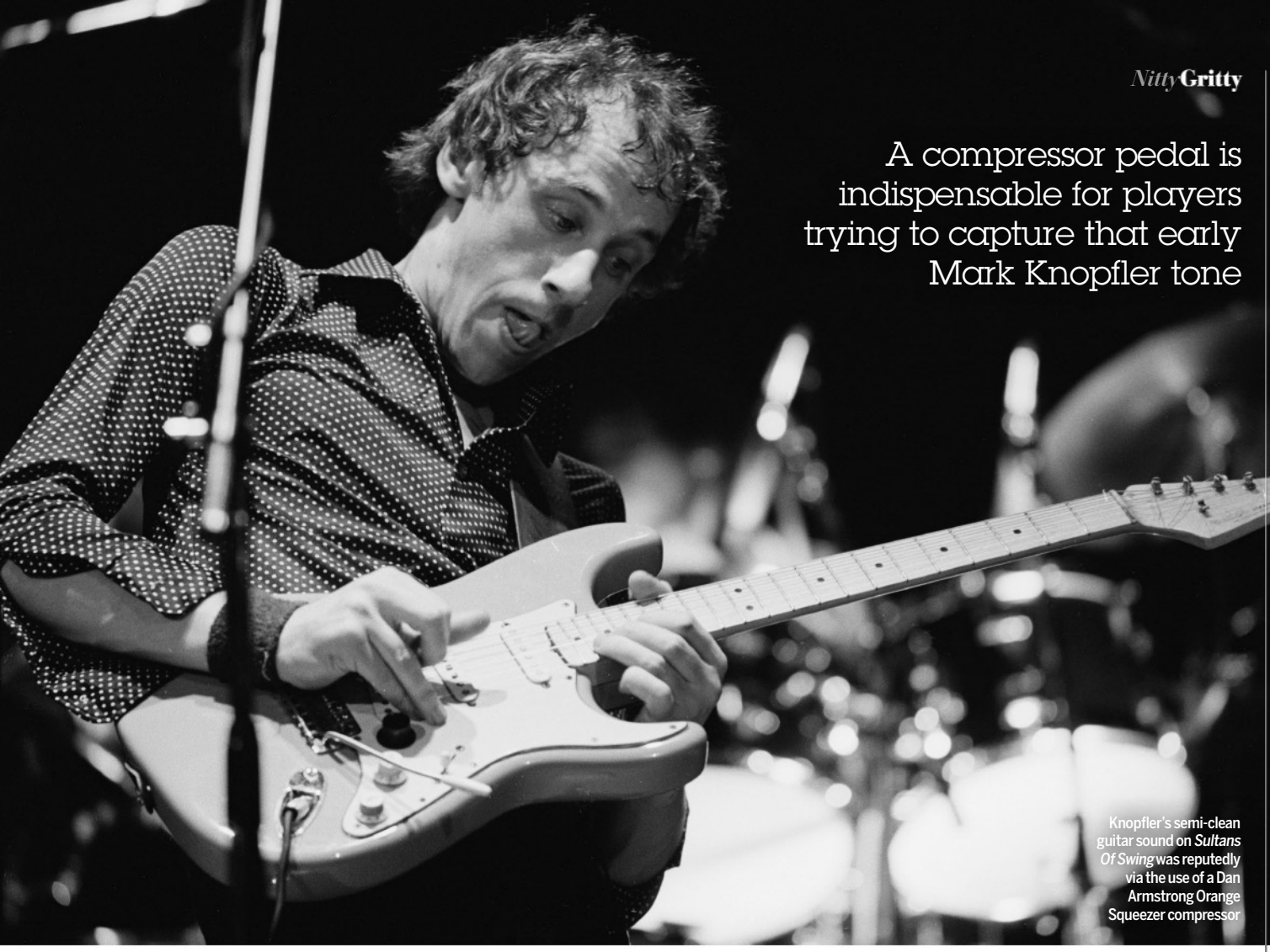
Musical tastes were changing faster than their attitudes and musicians soon noticed their recordings sounded better on the radio than they did in the control room or on their record players. Broadcasters always applied compression to prevent transmitter overload, so it was a logical move to apply more compression during mixing and or mastering to make finished records sound as good at home as they did on the radio.

Mix bus compression made recordings louder, clearer and punchier. The loudness effect is curious, given that compressors are designed to restrict volume peaks, but it works because our perception of loudness is based on average volume level, instead of transitory volume peaks.

Imagine that the dynamic range of a piece of music can be plotted on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the quietest and 10 the loudest. Let's say that peaky signals, such as bass and snare drums, hit 10 but most of the audio action is centred between 4 and 6. If a compressor reduces the peaks by a factor of three, it means that the overall level can be increased by the same amount without overloading the output. With the audio now averaging between 7 and 9, it stands to reason that the track will be perceived as louder. This can have the knock-on effect of making quieter elements of the mix easier to hear. These may include reverb and delay effects, room ambience, backing vocals, subtle performance details or textural guitar parts, which may conjure a sense of enhanced clarity.

As multitrack recording became commonplace, engineers started applying compression to individual instruments when recording and mixing. Certain compressors became industry standards for vocals, bass, drums and guitars. Vintage examples can be hugely expensive, but plug-in software emulations can sound superb and they're more accessible.

PRS's recent Mary Cries optical compression pedal is another option based on the vintage LA-2A



A compressor pedal is indispensable for players trying to capture that early Mark Knopfler tone

Knopfler's semi-clean guitar sound on *Sultans Of Swing* was reputedly via the use of a Dan Armstrong Orange Squeezer compressor

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Stompbox Compression

A compressor pedal can do a wonderful job of making your playing technique seem more refined than it really is. They can make picked arpeggios sound smoother and they bring out the cluck and quack with country picking. In fact, a compressor pedal is pretty much indispensable for country players or anybody trying to capture that early Mark Knopfler tone. It's also essential for funky rhythm, when everything depends on keeping the guitar even and up front in the mix. And the same applies if you need an acoustic guitar to drive a track. Roger McGuinn's iconic 12-string tone was so dependent on compression that he actually had a compressor built into his Rickenbacker signature model.

Compression can also be used to achieve the type of sustain that would normally require high-gain amp settings or a fuzzbox. David Gilmour's *Another Brick In The Wall* solo is a stellar example because his tone is very clean, but the notes seem like they could sustain indefinitely. This type of extreme compression completely eliminates a note's leading transient peak and then slowly releases its grip. So the compressor brings the volume and counteracts the note's natural decay. Although this creates a sort of infinite sustain effect, the compressor's output level must be cranked up to make up for the overall volume drop. The risk is that noise can become intrusive with these settings.

Xotic's SP offers a compact pedal solution based on the revered Ross Compressor

A compressor pedal can do a wonderful job of making your playing technique seem more refined

Newbies often ask where to put a compressor on the pedalboard. It's usual to place it at the beginning of the signal chain, otherwise they can negate the volume lift provided by fuzz, overdrive and boost pedals. However, applying compression post-boost or overdrive can provide really long sustain without the need for heavy overdrive or distortion. So long as the compression effect is light, it won't clamp down too hard when you do want more volume.

Compressors with output level controls can be used for clean boost, and when set for enhanced sustain they're useful for clean soloing. Some players like to keep a compressor switched on all the time to achieve a more detailed and 'produced' tone, and switching in a second compressor for soloing makes the clean sustain trick even more effective.

Compressors interact with your playing touch and the tonal characteristics of your guitar and amp. That's why it's so hard to provide definitive guidance on how the controls should be set. Excessive compression may make you feel like you're battling the pedal for control. Sometimes the 'best' setting is when you're not certain the compressor is even on. So be sure to experiment and get a feel for what the controls do and how they interact. G

www.huwpriceguitar.com

Rock Of Ages

Zilla Cabs' Paul Gough puts the spotlight on Celestion's G12T-75, a speaker that's divided opinion over the years

As with many things these days, head to YouTube and you'll find a reactionary video about almost any topic – and this is especially true when it comes to guitar speakers. You'll hear stories about how a certain speaker from 1997 sounds best if it was made before lunch on a Tuesday, or that another speaker is the worst thing ever but only if it has the blue sticker, otherwise it's amazing. A lot of this is generally just to get clicks, and even if there is a bit of truth somewhere, it tends to get lost beneath a million and one assumptions. To me, rarely has this been more true than for Celestion's G12T-75.

The T75 was released in the early 80s and soon became the go-to speaker for Marshall amplification. Not too long before and up until the late 70s, the Greenbacks (or more accurately Blackbacks at the time) were Marshall's favoured speakers, but the lower power ratings of the Greenbacks of between 25 and 30 watts was seen as too low. Therefore, and after a few alternatives, the 75-watt G12T-75 was settled upon. The T75 was quite well received at the start and it's easy to see why: it has a certain aggression and plenty of cut that can be useful for a lot of 80s guitar tones. However, somewhere between then and now, it seems to have become one of the more divisive speakers out there.

I spend a lot of time recording speakers, playing dozens of them each week, as well as listening to multiple speaker recordings and combinations in a studio setting. But over the years I really didn't come across the T75 that much. Maybe guitarists looking for a custom cab moved away from the most common guitar speaker out there, which makes sense, but I just didn't hear it too often. That said, when I heard murmurs of disappointment over the T75's sound, it did prick my ears. At first, these video appraisals seemed to focus around heavier playing styles, but I have to say, for the few T75s that we use at Zilla, the majority were for heavier players, often mixed with a V30.

Horses For Courses

At this point, I decided to have a closer look at how the T75 varied through the ages. I'm sure you can imagine, the most-used speaker is also probably one of the most-replaced speakers, too, and therefore, due to the T75 being so common, it's quite cheap and easy to get hold of some good examples of it throughout the years.

In general, well-looked-after speakers will sound softer and warmer with age (although at the same time, speakers from 4x12s tend to sound worse than from combos), so after finding multiple examples of T75s from the mid-80s up to the present day, I found the differences weren't actually night and day. The older models did sound that bit softer, but for heavier recordings there were certain qualities from the straight-out-of-the-box models that sounded better. In fact, the aggression in the sound could actually be useful in some styles. After recording each of our T75s with multiple different amps and tracks, we found it sounded pretty cool for some bluesy 'edge of break-up' stuff, especially in smaller combos.

> "I found the T75 useful for many different styles, and really quite good for a few"

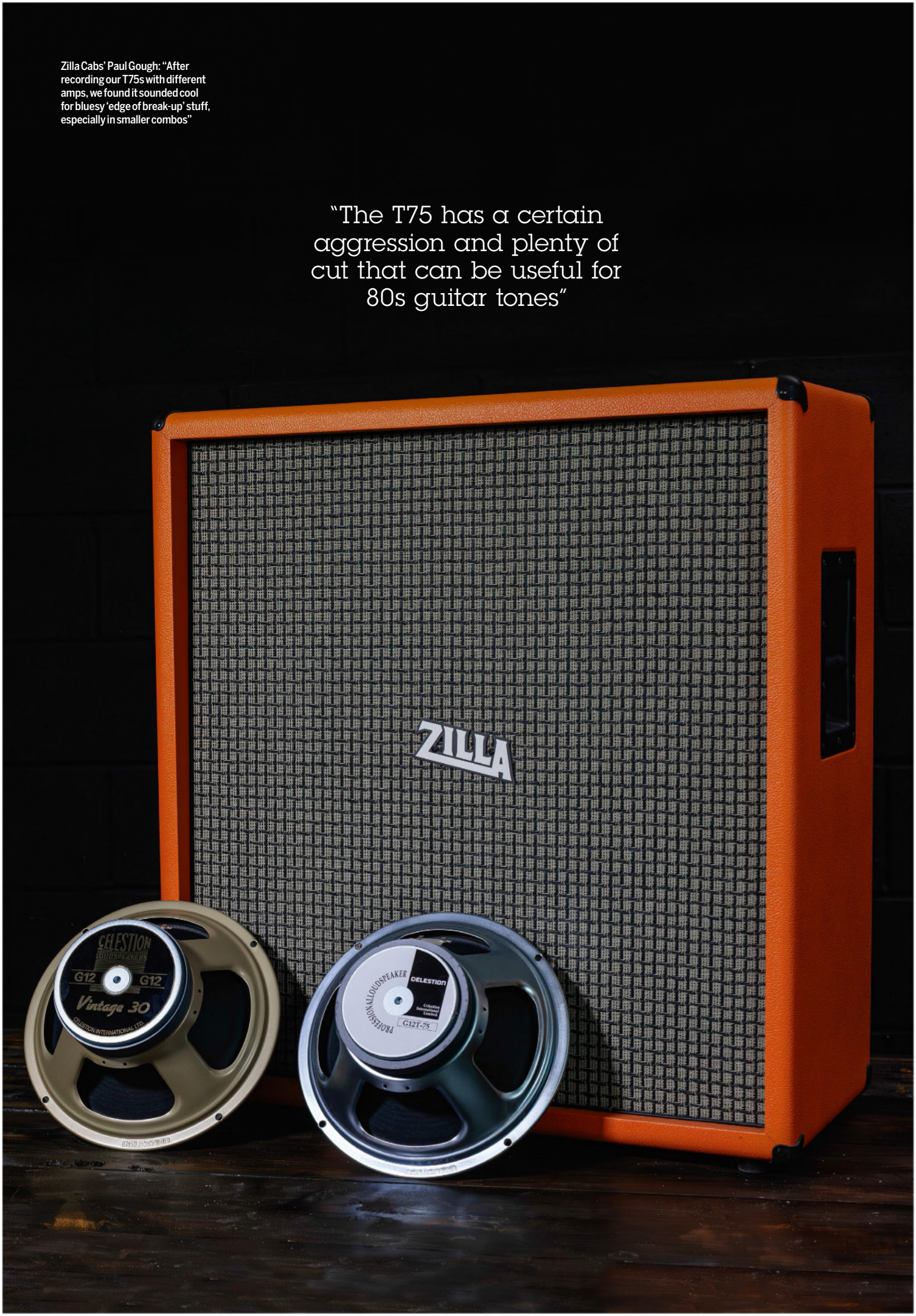
This demonstrates not only do we have different ears, each colouring what we hear, but we have different opinions on what sounds good. I managed to find the T75 useful for many different styles, and really quite good for a few. Sure, it can be a bit aggressive and there are plenty of speakers I'd recommend before it for many scenarios, but unless we have played every speaker, in every style and in a sufficient number of cabinets, then we might not have the authority to place a label on it. Instead, maybe just stick to saying, "I prefer something else." G

The G12T-75 speaker is as loud and out there as the opinions it generates

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZILLA CABS

Zilla Cabs' Paul Gough: "After recording our T75s with different amps, we found it sounded cool for bluesy 'edge of break-up' stuff, especially in smaller combos"

"The T75 has a certain aggression and plenty of cut that can be useful for 80s guitar tones"

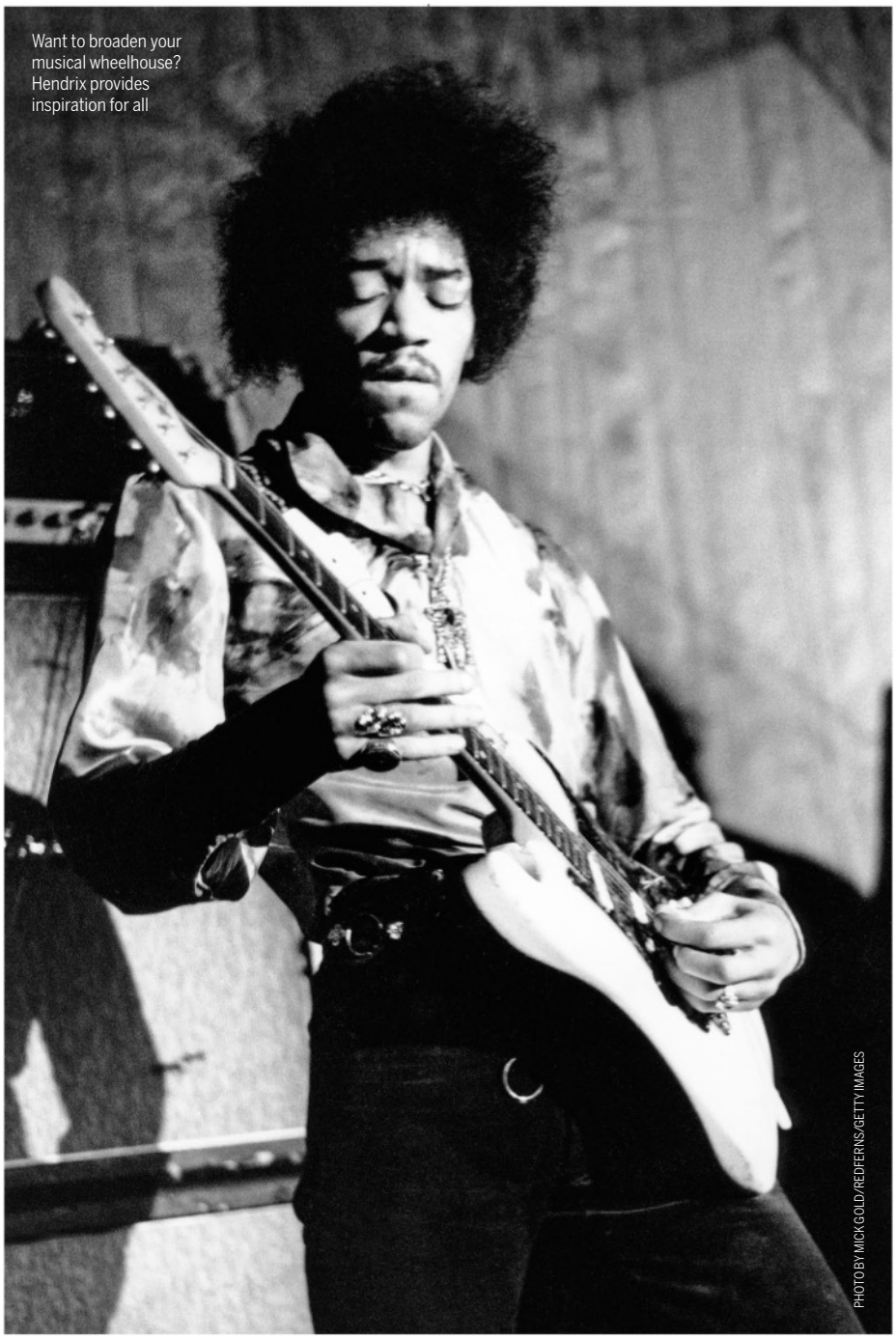


Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

With Jimi In Mind

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Haynes Inflection & Vox AC15 C1
Difficulty ★★★☆☆ | 15 mins per example



Want to broaden your musical wheelhouse? Hendrix provides inspiration for all

PHOTO BY MICK GOLD/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

IN THIS ISSUE, I hope to demonstrate just a few of the different skills used by Jimi Hendrix that made his playing so fascinating and impossible to categorise. There are five examples, primarily inspired by the solos and rhythm parts on his version of Dylan's *All Along The Watchtower*.

I believe Jimi recorded most, if not all, of the parts on that track using a Gibson Flying V, but this was relatively unusual, so I have gone with the single coils that are more typically associated with Hendrix.

The descending chord progression has a slight sting in the tail, ending with F# major, which still works fine playing a regular B minor pentatonic (with caution!), but it also opens up possibilities for venturing outside of this with some chord tones. Try playing an A# here (same as B♭, of course, but that's not what it's called in this key) and you'll see what I'm getting at.

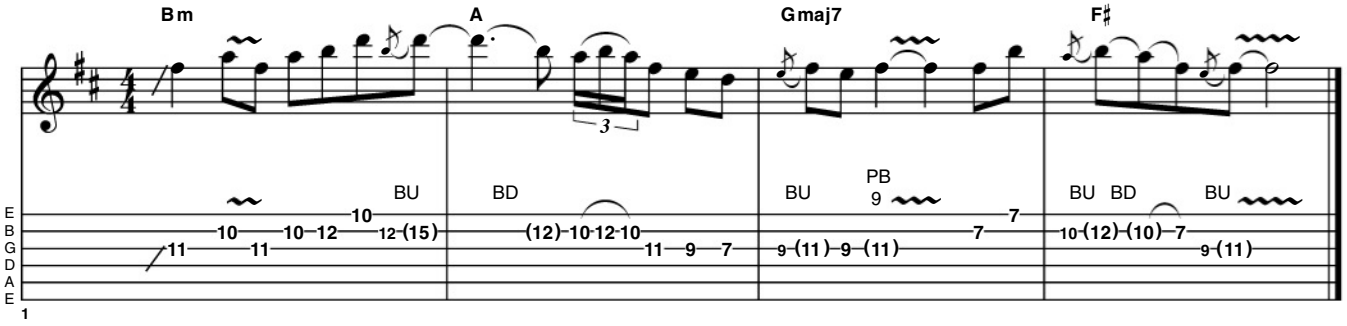
A jazz player would regard the F# major as a V chord, resolving to B minor as the I. If you listen again to Jimi's playing on *Watchtower*, he doesn't seem at all stuck in the standard pentatonic shapes. He was undoubtedly familiar with these, but I believe he just as often thought in chord shapes and built patterns from these. Perhaps *Little Wing* is the most widely known example of this, but you'll hear it on many of his recordings and live performances.

Inevitably, these examples merely scratch the surface, but hopefully they will give you some ideas – not to strictly copy or overanalyse, but the old adage 'steal from the best' most certainly comes into play here. I hope you get some good use from these ideas and see you next time! G

Richard Barrett's album, *Colours* (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

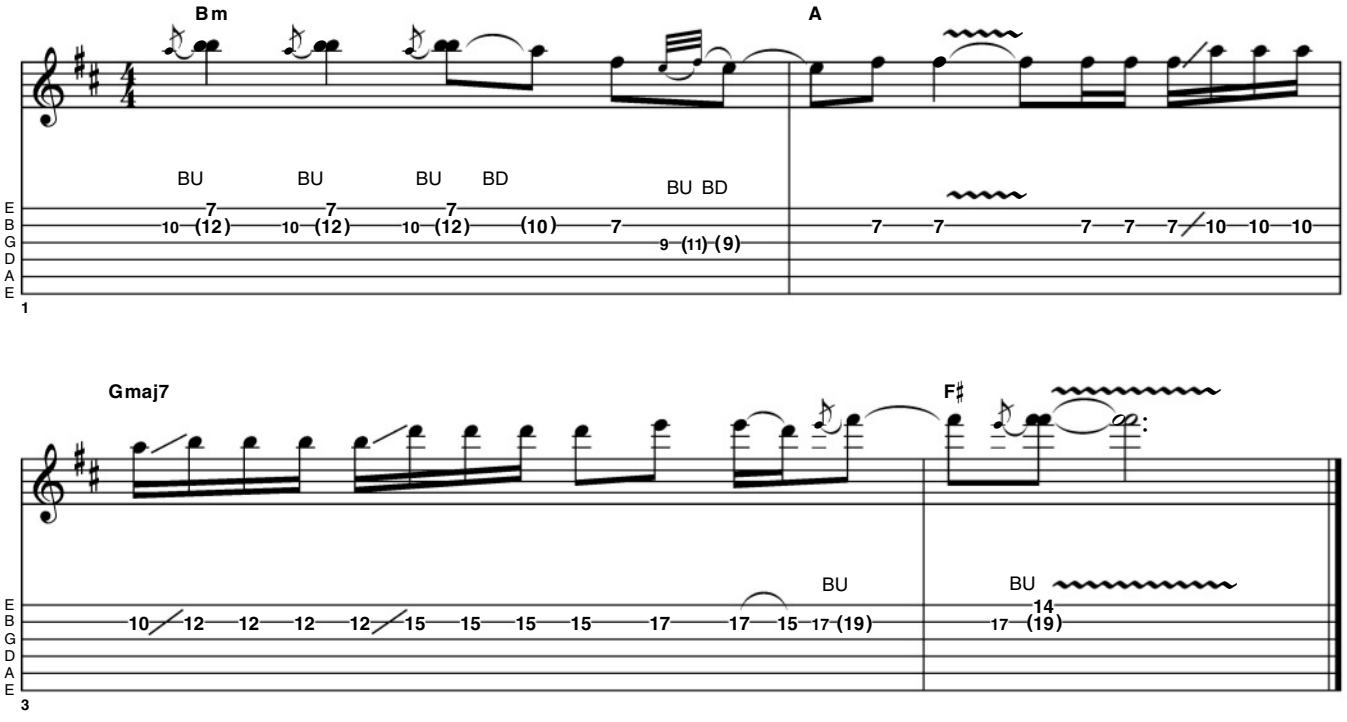
Example 1

THOUGH PREDOMINANTLY BASED AROUND THE B MINOR PENTATONIC, there are several moments where this example steps outside the kind of vocabulary most players were using in the late 60s. First, the tone and a half bend up to D at the beginning of bar 2 implies an Asus4 over the A major chord, then the emphasis on F# in bar 3, which is also still from the pentatonic but highlights the major 7th of Gmaj7th chord (F#).



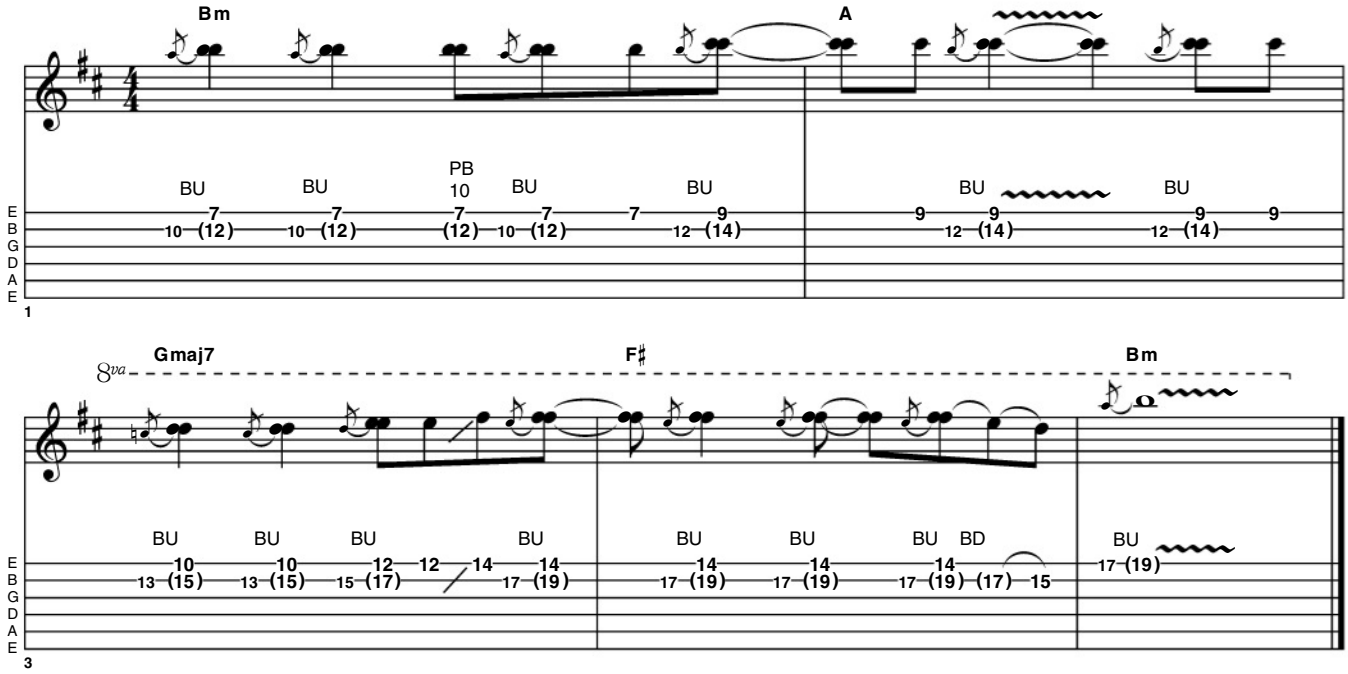
Example 2

THIS EXAMPLE STARTS WITH A UNISON BEND, leading to a short pentatonic phrase that's relatively simple to play but represents quite an unusual choice of notes, featuring the 6th (F#) over the A major chord in bar 2. I believe it is subtle twists such as this that elevate a relatively 'stock' phrase to something more musically pleasing. The rest of this phrase takes the shape of an ascending B minor pentatonic scale, played exclusively on the second string, which builds some drama.



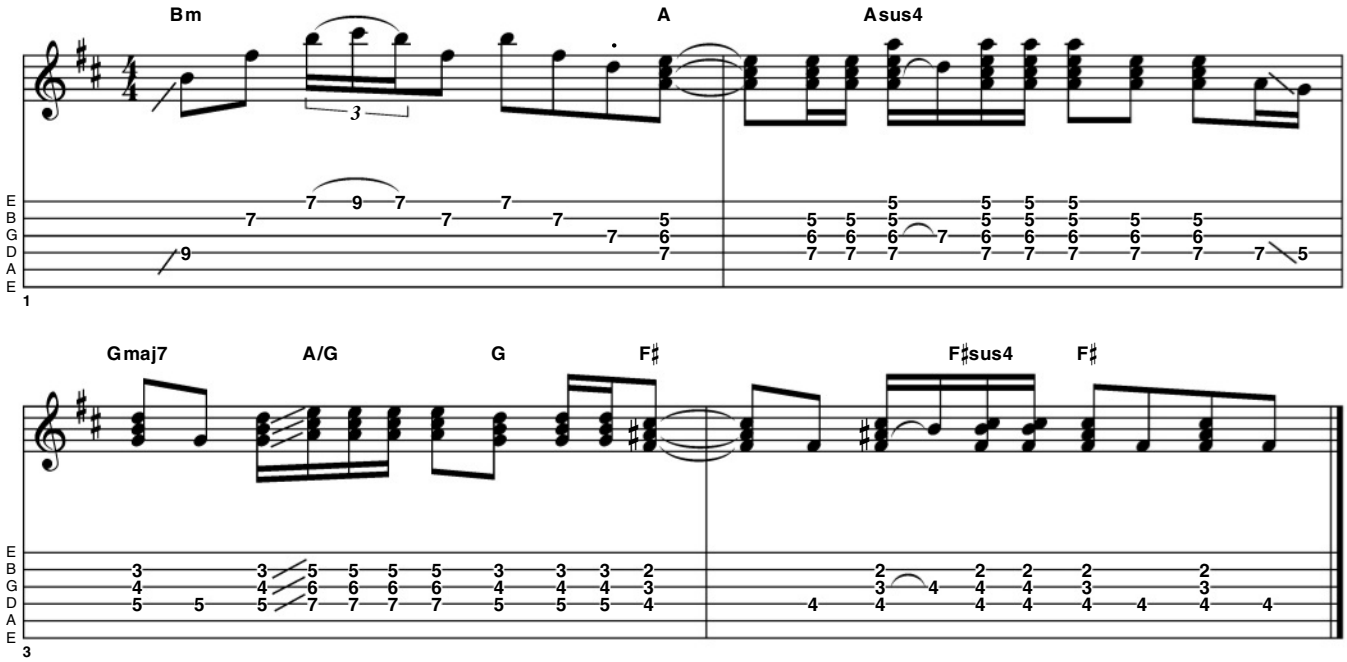
Example 3

TAKING THE IDEA FROM THE END OF EXAMPLE 2 and making a bit more from it, this phrase ascends through a melodic line taken from the B minor scale. This builds up a sense of tension that is then released by the bend up to the root note (B) at the start of bar 5. Lines such as this can be much more memorable than a selection of fluent licks, even when played slightly messily like this!



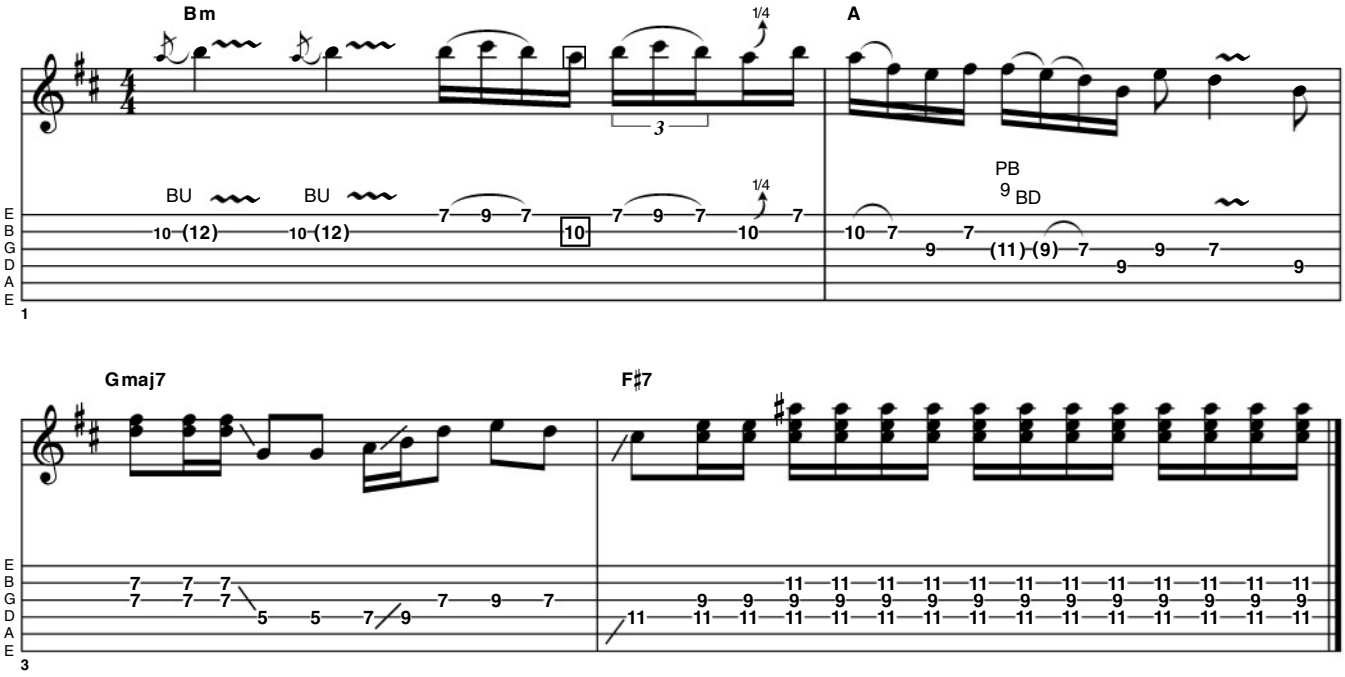
Example 4

TAKING A CHORDAL APPROACH, this example explores similar territory to *Little Wing* and some of *Have You Ever Been (To Electric Ladyland)*. It's not hard to see the formula in use here, though the shift between G and A triads adds a nice twist in bar 3. There are many more possibilities hidden within this idea, so be sure to experiment – one hint is to try adding embellishments from any nearby pentatonic shapes.



Example 5

BREAKING OUT A WAH PEDAL, this final example returns to a more single-note approach. The wah really adds a different colour to the initial B minor pentatonic phrase, sliding down then up to a conveniently placed F#7 chord. I'm rolling the wah slowly forwards while strumming to give a dramatic finish to the phrase. As with all of the examples, remember that committed delivery is key and that a simple phrase played with gravitas can often be just the thing.



Hear It Here

THE JIMI HENDRIX EXPERIENCE
ARE YOU EXPERIENCED

Released in May 1967, the debut album from The Jimi Hendrix Experience (in its UK edition) kicks off in enviable style with *Foxy Lady* ('*Foxey*' in the US version). Actually, an honourable mention must go to the US edition for its inclusion of *The Wind Cries Mary*. These days, it's easy enough to get hold of various enhanced editions, but be sure to check out the title track, plus *Fire*, *Third Stone From The Sun* and *I Don't Live Today*.

THE JIMI HENDRIX EXPERIENCE
AXIS: BOLD AS LOVE

Another release from (late) 1967 builds on the success of the first LP. Including classics such as *Little Wing*, *Castles Made Of Sand* and *If Six Were Nine*, this album demonstrates the wealth of techniques and tones that Jimi was pioneering at the time. It's worth checking out the whole album, but we'd also like to steer you in the particular direction of *Up From The Skies*, *Ain't No Telling* and, of course, the title track.

THE JIMI HENDRIX EXPERIENCE
ELECTRIC LADYLAND

In the final album released by this line-up before disbanding, there are no shortage of parts to take ideas from. *All Along The Watchtower* gets first mention as the track that inspired this feature, but you won't go wrong listening to *Have You Ever Been (To Electric Ladyland)*, *Voodoo Chile*, *Crosstown Traffic* or the elaborate (and some might say proto-prog) of *1983... (A Merman I Should Turn To Be)*, the longest track after *Voodoo Chile* that they committed to tape.

Guitarist

Nextmonth

PHOTO BY ADAM GASSON

JOHN SQUIRE

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